Australian Consumers' Association April 1994

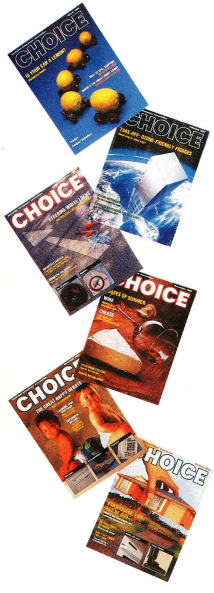
CHOICE

MIXED MESSAGES?
Fast food and school sponsorship

THE INVISIBLE WORKFORCE
Who cares for the carers?

HEARING AIDS
Not the only answer to hearing loss

TESTS:
Microwave ovens
Personal alarms



What does CHOICE do with your money?

ASK MOST PEOPLE what CHOICE does and they'll tell you we test products. That's certainly one of the things we do, and if you stop and think about it you might be surprised how much that costs.

We buy appliances like an ordinary consumer — from a retail store. We don't accept free samples from manufacturers, though very occasionally if we're trying to get a newly released product in time to include in a test for you, we'll go to the factory and pick out and buy a boxed sample from the racks. So we pay the prices you pay.

This adds up to hundreds of thousands of dollars each year. As an example, in the washing machine test planned for later this year for environmental reasons we'll be changing over to testing with a cold-water wash. This means we have to retest every model on the market, regardless of whether we've tested it before, because our test method up till now has used warm water. Even if you forget all the clones on the washing machine market, that's over 40 machines — and over $40 000.

This outlay only gets us the appliances — then the testing starts. Our labs are state-of-the-art and our staff highly qualified, and we work to keep both that way.

And of course testing isn't all we do. We run a dozen or more consumer surveys each year on topics ranging from satisfaction with insurance companies to appliance reliability. You can see some of the upcoming CHOICE survey reports below right. Collecting information from thousands of people, entering the data, analysing it statistically and then turning the results into readable, interesting and useful information also doesn't come cheap.

Tests and surveys aren't the only articles in CHOICE, of course. Our journalists regularly research a wide range of topics from health to money matters, nutrition to cars, to bring you articles on every aspect of being a consumer in the modern world. Our reorganised index on the back cover will help you find all our recent articles over the range of subject areas.

We also have a department devoted to consumer affairs in the public arena: lobbying governments, industry and service providers on matters like product safety, health care, food standards, checks and balances in the financial area, and much more. Where CHOICE gives you information to act on at a practical, individual level, our policy work aims to get better deals for all consumers as a right.

Last but by no means least, we have people working in customer service to answer your queries, pass on your tips about shonky products and services and to process your subscriptions and keep CHOICE arriving in your mailbox every month.

As we regularly emphasise (see *Who are we?*, left), we take no advertising in our publications and we get no subsidies, so it's your $48 each year that gives you all this. We hope you'll continue to enjoy CHOICE and what you get for your money.

Jane Mackenzie
Editor

Who are we?

CHOICE exists to help you make decisions about appliances and services. The reason you can rely on it is that the only interests we represent are yours — the consumer's.

We're not a government department or agency, and we get no ongoing funding from any government. Neither do we receive any subsidies from industry, manufacturers, unions or any other group, and we don't take any advertisements in the magazine. CHOICE survives purely because people like you subscribe to it: over 85% of our income is from CHOICE subscriptions, and the rest from sales of our Consumer Bookshelf and CHOICE Books, plus some special technical services such as testing appliances for their energy efficiency labelling. So we're independent in the true sense of the word: beholden to no-one but the consumers we represent and who keep CHOICE alive.

The organisation behind CHOICE is the Australian Consumers' Association. This does more than just publish CHOICE, as explained above: the 70 or so people who work here don't all have a public face, but they're all working for consumers in some way. You can become a member of the Consumers' Association as well as a CHOICE subscriber if you wish. The small extra membership fee you pay demonstrates your commitment to the rights of consumers, and gives you a subscription to a second magazine — either *Consuming Interest*, our publication covering broader consumer policy, or *CHOICE Travel*.

CHOICE and the Consumers' Association play an important role in Australian society. We're here because you think you need us, you trust us and you're prepared to pay to keep us going.

VOLUME 35 APRIL 1994 NUMBER 4

Cover photo: Rhonda Thwaite

Next issue

Steam irons, video recorders, plug-in safety switches, which health insurance companies have the most satisfied customers?, do you have a healthy diet?, artificial sweeteners, the bugs within us.

June, July, August

Tests: Large TVs, fan heaters, paté, cockroach killer update, vacuum cleaners, peanut butter, exterior paint, oven cleaners, strollers, mobile phones.
Surveys: Income protection insurance: which are the best policies?; annual CHOICE survey of supermarket prices; childcare — what do parents want, and what are they getting?; public transport: which towns and cities around Australia offer the best services?
Features: Charities; skiing holidays for beginners; options when selling your home; contact lenses; mailing lists; disclosure of life insurance commissions; credit card options; information about food — cutting through the waffle.

Features

10 Fast bucks

The school sponsorship debate encompasses the issues of school funding, the ethics of relationships between schools and business, the role of government education departments and the effects of advertising on children. Talk of fast food sponsors and you can add concern with children's health to that list: a very volatile recipe indeed.

14 The invisible workforce

It's estimated around two million people in Australia look after someone who's elderly, chronically ill or disabled. What support systems are there to help them?

24 Hearing aids — promised you a miracle?

The good news is that hearing aids have improved greatly with new technology, and it's estimated around 90% of people who need one will be given one free of charge by the Commonwealth Government. However, there's more to coping with hearing loss — and with a hearing aid — than just putting it in your ear.

34 Writing to your insurance company

Five examples of letters to help you deal with difficulties when making a claim.

39 Microwaving: your questions answered

Around 70% to 80% of homes in Australia own a microwave, and we're asked a lot of questions about their safety, effects on food, energy use and how best to use them. This article provides some of the answers.

Tests

7 Putting fast food to the test

We may not be bowled over by the idea of school sponsorship by fast food companies, but is there anything really wrong nutritionally with the food?

19 Personal emergency alarms

A modern cry for help: these alarms let people such as the elderly, sick or disabled know they're only a button's press away from help if they need it.

42 Medium microwave ovens

Most microwaves these days cope well with the basics of defrosting, reheating and simple cooking, but sometimes their automatic functions still don't quite deliver the goods.

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Do annual vehicle inspections improve the safety of cars on our roads, or are they just a waste of everyone's time and money?

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Green investments; fast food packaging.

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Test yourself with our regular consumer quiz.

Can you help?

PLANNING AND BUYING A FITTED KITCHEN

What are the pitfalls for consumers in having a fitted kitchen installed? If you've had recent experience with this home improvement project we'd like to hear from you.

In particular:

- How did you choose the kitchen company?
- Why didn't you 'do-it-yourself'?
- How much was the quotation?
- What was the final cost?
- Do you consider it was good value for money? Please explain your answer and give a guide as to what you got for your money (eg number of cupboards, bench finishes, appliances, tiling, etc).
- Were the salespeople honest with you?
- Were the tradespeople professional?
- Were you pleased with the final job? If not, what went wrong?
- How many days did the job take, from the first day of work to the last?
- Was this on time, quicker or longer than you were told to expect?
- If you had any disputes, what were they about (eg delays, quality of work, increasing cost, unavailability of selected materials)?
- If you had a dispute, what was the outcome?
- Have you any advice to other CHOICE readers who are thinking about buying a kitchen?

We would appreciate receiving your letter by **May 6, 1994**. Please address it to: **Buying a kitchen**, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204.

Thank you.

FUNDING YOUR CHILD'S EDUCATION

Have you set money aside for your child's education? Overseas this has been a popular form of financial investment for many years and it's starting to become more of a consumer issue here.

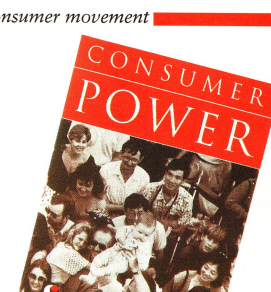
If you've looked into the various options we'd appreciate hearing about your experiences.

- What is the scheme called?
- Which company runs and promotes the scheme?
- What are the financial particulars: How much money do you contribute? How often (monthly, annually, etc)? How many years must you invest?
- Is there a guaranteed rate of return on your funds invested, or is it left up to market performance?
- Was the scheme documentation revealing, accurate and informative?
- Have you had any disputes with the scheme management? What happened?
- If the scheme management company goes broke, do you know what will happen to your investment? Was this explained to you at any time?
- What happens to your money if your child doesn't go on to the appropriate level of education?
- If you looked at alternative schemes, why did you reject them and choose the one you're in?
- What warnings would you pass on to other potential customers?
- Have you devised your own investment scheme instead? Please tell us what you've done.

We would appreciate receiving your letter by **May 13, 1994**. Please address it to: **Funding your child's education**, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204.

Thank you.

Consumer movement



CONSUMER POWER — WHO? WHAT? WHERE? HOW?

IF YOU WERE ASKED to explain the origins of the consumer movement in Australia or how the various consumer agencies (state and federal) and organisations interrelate, what would you say? It's not easy to understand who the players are and what they're trying to achieve.

Teachers particularly must find it a challenge to explain the consumer network to their students.

A useful resource is a new directory of the consumer movement called *Consumer Power*, from the Federal Bureau of Consumer Affairs.

This 32-page booklet outlines the eight consumer rights, with explanations of how they are being used and enforced in practice — for example, the introduction of mandatory consumer product safety standards for children's nightclothes, sunglasses and motor vehicle child restraints as part of the realisation of a general consumer **Right to Safety**.

The booklet profiles the major consumer agencies in Australia, including the Trade Practices Commission and the Prices Surveillance Authority, and includes non-government organisations such as the Australian Consumers' Association and the Australian Federation of Consumer Organizations (AFCO). (However, the listing could make the difference between government agencies and non-government organisations clearer, a problem that has an ongoing effect on people's perceptions of who we — the Consumers' Association — are, and their understanding of our independence.) Telephone numbers and addresses are included to assist the community to get in touch.

Though the work of smaller independent consumer organisations gets only a brief mention, the booklet is a very useful starting place for understanding the role and activities of sometimes faceless government and other agencies in protecting consumer rights.

Consumer Power is available free of charge. If you'd like a copy — or multiple copies for a school class or other group — write to the Education Officer, Federal Bureau of Consumer Affairs, PO Box E438, Queen Victoria Terrace ACT 2600.

VIDEO VICTIMS

■ "I have had several fines for late videos that I haven't even borrowed. I have since found out the store had allowed some of my relatives to borrow videos using my name but without having to produce a membership card." (AB, Mildura, Victoria.)

■ "I'm now living in Adelaide, but several years ago I lived in a town in Victoria with my mother. Can you imagine my mother's surprise when the local video store rang her to say the video I had been in and ordered earlier that day had now come in?

"I haven't used that service for perhaps two or three years. So who is?" (JM, Sefton Park, SA.)

The imposition of unjustified fines — or a letter from a debt collection agency — can be distressing. One reader's letter mentioned attempts by her video store to recover fines totalling $800 (later reduced by the court to $180).

Have you had problems with the security system at your local video rental store? Last year we asked readers to get in touch if they had experienced problems like this. We wanted to find out some idea of the scale and importance of security failures.

However, only a trickle of letters was received. Does this mean all is well? The Australian Video Retailers' Association will be discussing membership and video security at its conference in May this year. "I wouldn't say security is a small problem," says national coordinator of the association, Kate Hartwig, "but it's a difficult problem to deal with. For example, the customer gets upset if refused service having left the membership card at home."

At one point the association was working on a standard-form membership contract, but that seems to have slipped into limbo. In the pipeline is a computer system which will scan a photo of the member and bring this up on screen whenever the membership card is presented.

What can you do to reduce the likelihood of falling foul of poor security systems?

■ Ask your local video shop to introduce photo cards.

■ Never leave returned videos on the counter — they can be picked up and removed by another customer, and they may be outside the shop's security system. Return your videos into a secure shute or into the hands of staff.

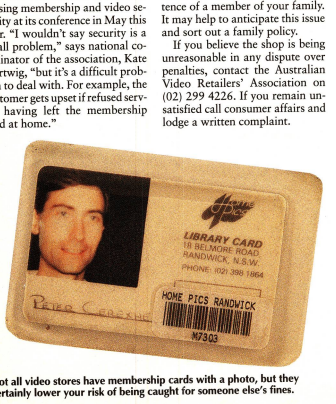
■ Find out the penalty system operating at the store. If penalties seem unfair or too high, make your feelings known to the proprietor and, where practical, suggest you may take your business elsewhere.

■ You should not have to shout (or even whisper) a membership password across the counter; this is a hopelessly insecure system.

■ Keep a record of your rentals: note the title and day borrowed/returned. This will help you remember when they are due back and, if a dispute arises, will let you feel confident of the facts.

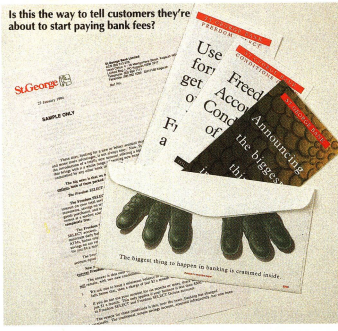
■ A video shop may reluctantly bend its security rules at the insistence of a member of your family. It may help to anticipate this issue and sort out a family policy.

If you believe the shop is being unreasonable in any dispute over penalties, contact the Australian Video Retailers' Association on (02) 299 4226. If you remain unsatisfied call consumer affairs and lodge a written complaint.



Not all video stores have membership cards with a photo, but they certainly lower your risk of being caught for someone else's fines.

Is this the way to tell customers they're about to start paying bank fees?



ST GEORGE BANK — KILLING TWO BIRDS WITH ONE PROMO

AND THEY SAID it wasn't their style! St George Bank has finally introduced fees on many of its accounts, despite a sustained media campaign over many years based on a 'no fees' philosophy.

Apparently administration costs can no longer be supported without the help of customers. "Today, accounts are being used more often than ever before," says St George in a letter to account holders, "and this is adding significantly to administration costs ... All accounts, even the low-balance inactive ones, *have* to be serviced."

St George has chosen to notify customers of the introduction of fees by pairing this news with promotional material on two new Freedom accounts. These accounts offer ancillary benefits such as savings on travel, free accidental death insurance cover of $5000 and commission-free travellers' cheques (with the Deluxe account).

This may well be a valuable offer. However, we're concerned that some existing Freedom account holders may have missed the part of the promotional pack which tells them they too will have to pay the new fees even if they don't sign up for the enhanced accounts.

It was such an obvious promotion of new accounts that this writer, for one, simply read the first few paragraphs of the covering letter then threw the pack away. It was only upon hearing the concerns of another St George customer that he realised he was going to be paying fees on his account.

How did this happen? The letter to customers sets out to sell the new accounts in bold type: **"The big news is that we have created *two new Freedom and Freedom Visa account options*, both of them packed with valuable benefits and unique to banking in Australia."**.

It is only at the bottom of the page — not in bold — that the bad news comes for current Freedom and Freedom Visa accounts: a $2 per month charge when the minimum balance falls below $250 per month, and a $1 per month fee when an account is inactive for six months or more (with a balance below $500).

And when did the fees commence? The letter doesn't even say! You've got to look elsewhere through the accompanying papers to find out — February 1, 1994, according to the *Conditions of Use* leaflet. Unfortunately the news release issued by St George contradicts this, saying that fees begin from March 1.

Some accounts will still be fee-free, and the scale of fees is competitive. But really, St George, your marketers might think it looks good to soften the blow of bad news in this way, but we can only wonder how many other customers have missed the sting in the tail. We believe you should write again, clearly.

CHILD-SAFE PEN TOPS

PEN TOPS may not invoke a parent's child safety anxiety in the way boiling kettles or swimming pools do, but they can be just as dangerous if swallowed. Recently an international standard for pen tops was agreed which attempts to minimise the risk of suffocation to young children.

The international standard follows the success of a similar British standard, which was introduced two years ago. Between 1970 and 1984 it was reported that nine British children died by being asphyxiated by pen tops. Since the introduction of the standard in Britain two years ago not one child has died, even though about a dozen a year are hospitalised with pen tops stuck in their throats. In Australia, data obtained by the National Injury Surveillance Unit from up to 50 hospitals between 1987 and 1993 suggests 31 cases of children being taken to hospital after swallowing pen tops.

The basic aim of the standard is to ensure pen tops are designed in such a way as to allow some air to pass through if they become lodged in a person's windpipe. This can be done in a number of ways. For example, a clip that runs the length of the top can form an air channel. Another way is to have a hole in the end of the top. For felt-tipped pens which need to be sealed, the top could be made using an inner and outer cap with an air passage between.

Many pens sold in Australia already have tops with these safety features, but currently there is no mandatory standard. Adopting a version of the international standard would ensure all pens sold in Australia are safe. On June 17 Kidsafe Australia will be giving away 'safe' pens as part of its Kidsafe Day promotion. The felt-tipped marker pens, made by Faber-Castell, have tops which conform to the international standard.

Look for pen tops like these which have an airway to prevent suffocation if they're swallowed — a small but real child safety issue.

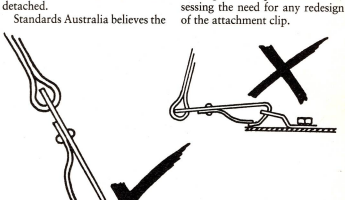
PROBLEMS BELTING UP THE KIDS

A REPORT from Queensland of a child car restraint becoming detached from its floor anchorage has prompted Standards Australia to issue a warning regarding a potential problem with the new 'universal' anchoring system in the December 1993 issue of its magazine, *The Australian Standard*.

The problem is with the fitting of the top strap of the restraint. If the strap is tensioned and the clip is wedged under the anchor fitting instead of freely rising up from it, it's possible the strap may become detached.

Standards Australia believes the chances of a restraint clip getting into this mislocated position and becoming detached are low, but emphasises the need for extra care to be taken when fitting any restraints with this type of anchoring system. Parents should double-check that the clip for the top restraint is in the correct position before strapping in their children. The older 'keyhole' type anchor system doesn't suffer from this problem.

Standards Australia is currently looking into the problem and assessing the need for any redesign of the attachment clip.



Price watch

MINIMUM MAX FACTOR

A RECENT packaging change to MAX FACTOR Pan-Cake make-up, made by Procter & Gamble, generated a flurry of letters to the company's complaints department. **Pan-Cake** used to be sold in a plain screw-top container holding 40 grams of make-up and retailing for around $18. The company changed this to a mirrored compact with only 15 grams, selling for around the same price. What's more, 15 gram refills for the compact were priced at just over $12, which amounts to about double the old price per gram of make-up!

According to Procter & Gamble's Marketing Services Director, Paul Nix, a number of consumer complaints were received protesting about the change: "Frankly, we made a mistake." The company had felt consumers would find the mirrored compact good value even though it contained less make-up.

To Procter & Gamble's credit it decided to take on board the complaints: it is now including a free 15 gram refill when you buy the **Pan-Cake** compact and is selling the refills in packs of two for $12.95. A letter from Procter & Gamble points out: "When [customers] buy the refill with the free 15 gram pack for $12.95, they will be paying the same price per gram as they previously did for the old 40 gram **Pan-Cake**."

What is not to the company's credit is its attempt to cash in on its 'mistake' by advertising these double refills as "Twice the size — same price". A more appropriate slogan might read "Same price per gram as you used to pay — just different packaging".

Car accidents

A DRIVER'S RECORD

YOU'RE probably familiar with the idea of black box recorders in aircraft giving evidence to experts as to how an accident occurred. According to a report from the well-respected, conservative German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, researchers in Sweden have been putting black boxes into cars to try and learn more about car accidents.

A German-made black box for cars is now available in Europe and costs around $500 plus fitting. It's raising interest because it has the potential to be a more accurate record of certain accident details than the reports of eyewitnesses, or to corroborate the report of a driver where no-one else was present.

Apparently fleet operators have found that cars equipped with one of these devices are involved in accidents less frequently than others, but the reason for this is as yet unknown.

Computerised developments in modern cars already record (or have the potential to record) accident information. Holden, for example, collects diagnostic information gathered when an airbag is triggered on the current Commodore. A black box called the SDM (sensing diagnostic module), located under the driver's seat, sends the signal which sets off the airbag under certain accident conditions (based on the G-factor of deceleration and the angle of collision off the centre line). This information will be used to refine calibration of the system in later vehicles.

If car manufacturers choose to incorporate black boxes in their vehicles, the price of the device may be reduced to the point where it is a viable accessory.

But there are public policy issues to be sorted through. An unresolved issue is whether evidence from the black box can be used in court against the will of the owner/driver. The current design of the European box, we believe, allows the driver to erase the record after an accident — should this be allowed? It's an issue which will have to be faced.

PUTTING FAST FOOD TO THE TEST

How do fast foods stack up nutritionally? Are any types better choices than others? We put them to the test.

WE BOUGHT MOUNTAINS of fast food items — cheeseburgers, chickenburgers, hamburgers, pizza, chips, chicken nuggets and more — and analysed them. We included national chains only — McDonald's, Hungry Jack's, Red Rooster, KFC and Pizza Hut — and purchased some of their best-selling items as well as other products we were particularly interested in analysing. For instance, we wanted to see if the **Spicy skin-free chicken roll** from **RED ROOSTER** was any lower in fat than a standard chicken item. For each food we analysed the protein, fat and carbohydrate content and calculated the calorie content from these figures; we also analysed the sodium and fibre content. For comparison we also calculated these figures (using food composition tables) for meat pies and fish and chips.

We've presented our findings in terms of different meal combinations from each of the national fast food chains, listed in the table overleaf.

■ In general, how does fast food rate?

Although occasional fast food snacks or meals are fine, they don't have a frequent place in a healthy diet. Fast food tends to be high in fat, low in complex carbohydrate and high in sodium: not the recipe for a healthy diet. A well balanced diet is low in fat, high in complex carbohydrate, high in fibre and low in sodium. It's difficult to maintain a low-fat diet if you often eat individual foods which are high in fat.

None of the foods we tested can be recommended on a nutritional basis for frequent eating. Despite this, they're not nutritional deserts — they do provide some vitamins and minerals and most have some fibre, many in a useful amount, but there are much better ways of obtaining fibre — fruit and vegetables, wholegrain cereals, rice and pasta, for example. The point is, they are not the best way to obtain even the nutrients they do provide because of the high fat and sodium content of most fast foods.

■ Is one chain better than another?

There's not really much to choose between the ones we looked at. **PIZZA HUT** offers slightly better options. If you stick to just three slices of a regular pizza, its

Pizzas, burgers, chicken, chips ... we tested the nutritional make-up of the lot for this article.

Vegetarian pizza is OK — it has adequate fibre, is low in fat and has a good level of carbohydrate. Other **PIZZA HUT** pizzas, however, are either higher in fat or lower in fibre, high in sodium or a combination of them all.

All the burger and chicken chains' food is high in fat. Most are high in sodium and most are low in complex carbohydrate.

■ Is one type of food better?

In terms of fat, half a regular pizza has the edge over the other meal combinations we tested. As the **Vegetarian** pizza doesn't have any processed meat (which is high in fat), it is the best. The downside of pizzas is they tend to be high in sodium because of cheese, processed meats and toppings like olives and anchovies. They're also a bit low in complex carbohydrate. And note the difference the serving size makes: a *whole* pizza (six slices) doubles your fat intake and provides nearly half the total kilojoules/calories considered to be the average requirement per day for a 35-year-old man. For women the proportion of the average daily energy requirement it provides would be even higher.

'Pile it high' options like **HUNGRY JACK'S Bacon double cheeseburger** are laden with fat — one of these with a regular serve of chips contains 10 teaspoons of it.

Although grilling is usually a lower-fat cooking option, **HUNGRY JACK'S Grilled chicken burger** has 21 g of fat — that's still over four teaspoons. Combine that with a regular serve of chips and you're eating 7.5 teaspoons of fat. Not what you'd call a healthy option.

Other particularly high-fat options include three pieces of **KFC Original recipe chicken** with regular chips and coleslaw — this also provides you with 10 teaspoons of fat. Chicken nuggets are also very fatty.

High fat spells high calories too — not necessarily a problem for everyone, but something to bear in mind if you need to watch your weight, especially if you tend to think of these foods as snacks.

■ Is chicken better than hamburgers?

All the chicken options in this test are high in fat — even the **RED ROOSTER Spicy skin-free chicken roll**. If chicken skin is removed it reduces the fat content by about half — but not if the cooking process involves fat or if other fat like mayonnaise is added when it's served.

■ How do the chains' foods compare to fish and chips and meat pie and chips?

Both fish and chips and meat pie and chips are similarly high in fat. They are also low in fibre. If anything they are even worse than the fast foods we tested!

■ How do fries rate?

All chips are fatty. On a weight for weight basis, of the ones we tested **McDONALD'S** have the most fat (19%) and **RED ROOSTER Crunchy potato wedges** have the least (11%) — but the regular serve size of wedges is about twice the weight of a regular serve of **McDONALD'S** fries, so you're eating the same amount of fat overall. The difference in percentage of

Fast food nutritional breakdown

	Weight of serve (grams)	1 Sodium (mg per serve)	2 Fibre (g per serve)	3 Fat (grams per serve
IDEAL FOR A TOTAL DIET	not applicable	920–2300 per day *(A)*	30 per day	not applicable
MEAL COMBINATION (in ascending order of total kilojoules/calories)				
PIZZA HUT ½ Regular Supreme thin 'n crispy (3 slices)	200	1406	11	22
PIZZA HUT ½ Regular Vegetarian pan pizza (3 slices)	237	770	13	13
PIZZA HUT ½ Regular Hawaiian pan pizza (3 slices)	222	1053	7	15
KFC Original recipe chicken (1 piece), regular chips	204	563	8	27
PIZZA HUT ½ Regular Super Supreme pan pizza (3 slices)	237	1280	11	20
PIZZA HUT ½ Regular Supreme pan pizza (3 slices)	238	1236	8	22
KFC ¼ Tenderroast chicken, regular chips	268	934	8	31
PIZZA HUT Whole Lunchtime Supreme pan pizza	245	1199	13	21
HUNGRY JACK'S Cheeseburger, regular fries	215	884	9	29
McDONALD'S Cheeseburger, regular fries	208	803	10	31
FISH AND CHIPS	265	872	5	40
RED ROOSTER ¼ chicken, regular crunchy potato wedges	323	1420	9	37
KFC Chicken fillet burger, regular chips	282	748	12	31
KFC Original recipe chicken (2 pieces), regular chips	272	914	8	31
RED ROOSTER ¼ chicken and chips *(C)*	295	945	8	37
MEAT PIE AND CHIPS	310	1330	6	43
HUNGRY JACK'S Grilled chicken burger, regular fries	285	1046	15	37
KFC Chicken nuggets (x9), regular chips	287	1448	15	40
McDONALD'S Big Mac, regular fries	314	1015	14	49
HUNGRY JACK'S Bacon double cheeseburger, regular fries	307	1256	10	50
McDONALD'S Quarter pounder, regular fries	290	1175	11	45
RED ROOSTER Spicy skin-free chicken roll, regular chips *(D)*	331	1411	14	39
HUNGRY JACK'S Whopper, regular fries	367	1178	16	42
RED ROOSTER Chicken roll, regular chips	344	1359	14	43
KFC Original recipe chicken (3 pieces), regular chips, coleslaw	461	1606	10	50
PIZZA HUT Whole regular Supreme pan pizza (6 slices)	475	2472	17	44
FRENCH FRIES/CHIPS				
RED ROOSTER regular chips	123	302	6	15
HUNGRY JACK'S regular fries	101	248	6	16
McDONALD'S regular fries	97	146	5	18
KFC regular chips	137	212	8	16
RED ROOSTER crunchy potato wedges (regular)	189	871	9	20

(A) 920 mg is the lower recommended dietary intake (RDI) for sodium, 2300 mg the upper RDI. *(B)* This is the average energy requirement of a 19 to 35-year-old male.
(C) The serve of chips in this meal was larger (160 g) than a normal 'regular' serve. *(D)* This is a 'special' that won't always be available.

fat is probably in the thickness. McDONALD'S chips are thin, so have a high surface area compared to volume — this means they absorb more oil in cooking.

■ **Do vegetables help?**

Options with vegetables sound better, but what's the real story? A higher proportion of vegetables naturally brings down the proportion of fat and increases the fibre content of a meal. As the example of fries shows, however, a once healthy vegetable can have its nutritional profile distorted by fat in the cooking process. The humble jacket potato is an excellent vegetable choice — but not so its fatty cousin, the chip.

Similarly, vegetarian pizzas may be a better option — but watch the cheese. Salads are a good choice as long as they are not drenched in an oily dressing or smothered by mayonnaise. KFC's coleslaw provides a small amount of fibre and is low-fat — but it can't 'save' a meal of **KFC Original recipe chicken** and **regular chips**. That meal is still a very fatty one.

Fast food survival tips

By following these tips you can enjoy fast food without risking your health:

1. Don't eat fast food meals as a snack. When you add up the kilojoules or calories, most fast food items are pretty loaded — the equivalent of a full meal.

2. Watch the serving size. By eating smaller portions — only half a pizza or a hamburger without the fries — you'll reduce your fat intake, making it easier to maintain an overall balanced diet.

3. Choose your options carefully. Some items are more fat-loaded than others. Half a pizza is generally speaking a better choice than the hamburgers we tested, but go easy on the ones piled high with cheese or processed meats, which are fatty and salty. Hamburger buns are a useful source of fibre and carbohydrate.

4. A little of what you fancy... There's no harm in eating fast food once in a while, but it doesn't have a place in a healthy diet on a frequent basis. It's difficult to say exactly how often is too often — so much depends on what else you're eating. But as a guide, more than once or twice a week will probably put your diet out of balance.

5. Watch the extras. Ask for no added salt if you're watching your salt intake. Remember that many salad dressings are oily; mayonnaise is very fatty too. Extra cheese on a pizza is extra fat. We could go on ...

3 Fat (% total energy)	4 Protein (% total energy)	5 Carbohydrate (% total energy)	Energy (kJ / cal)	
30 or less	15	55 or more	11600 / 2770 per day *(B)*	**IDEAL FOR A TOTAL DIET**
				MEAL COMBINATION (in ascending order of total kilojoules/calories)
39	25	36	2110 / 505	**PIZZA HUT** ½ Regular Supreme thin 'n crispy (3 slices)
22	23	55	2160 / 515	**PIZZA HUT** ½ Regular Vegetarian pan pizza (3 slices)
25	22	53	2190 / 525	**PIZZA HUT** ½ Regular Hawaiian pan pizza (3 slices)
44	16	39	2230 / 535	**KFC** Original recipe chicken (1 piece), regular chips
31	20	49	2450 / 585	**PIZZA HUT** ½ Regular Super Supreme pan pizza (3 slices)
32	21	47	2540 / 605	**PIZZA HUT** ½ Regular Supreme pan pizza (3 slices)
45	23	32	2580 / 615	**KFC** ¼ Tenderroast chicken, regular chips
30	22	48	2580 / 615	**PIZZA HUT** Whole Lunchtime Supreme pan pizza
41	13	46	2660 / 635	**HUNGRY JACK'S** Cheeseburger, regular fries
42	13	45	2680 / 640	**McDONALD'S** Cheeseburger, regular fries
53	16	29	2770 / 660	**FISH AND CHIPS**
47	22	31	2920 / 295	**RED ROOSTER** ¼ chicken, regular crunchy potato wedges
39	18	44	2940 / 705	**KFC** Chicken fillet burger, regular chips
46	21	33	2970 / 710	**KFC** Original recipe chicken (2 pieces), regular chips
46	21	34	3010 / 720	**RED ROOSTER** ¼ chicken and chips
52	11	34	3040 / 725	**MEAT PIE AND CHIPS**
45	15	40	3080 / 735	**HUNGRY JACK'S** Grilled chicken burger, regular fries
47	17	36	3140 / 750	**KFC** Chicken nuggets (x9), regular chips
44	15	41	3540 / 845	**McDONALD'S** Big Mac, regular fries
50	17	33	3680 / 880	**HUNGRY JACK'S** Bacon double cheeseburger, regular fries
45	17	38	3700 / 885	**McDONALD'S** Quarter pounder, regular fries
38	17	45	3760 / 895	**RED ROOSTER** Spicy skin-free chicken roll, regular chips
41	16	43	3770 / 900	**HUNGRY JACK'S** Whopper, regular fries
41	14	45	3930 / 940	**RED ROOSTER** Chicken roll, regular chips
44	22	33	4200 / 1005	**KFC** Original recipe chicken (3 pieces), regular chips, coleslaw
32	21	47	5080 / 1215	**PIZZA HUT** Whole regular Supreme pan pizza (6 slices)
41	5	52	1350 / 320	**RED ROOSTER** regular chips
43	5	51	1360 / 325	**HUNGRY JACK'S** regular fries
45	5	49	1470 / 350	**McDONALD'S** regular fries
40	6	53	1490 / 355	**KFC** regular chips
44	7	49	1670 / 400	**RED ROOSTER** crunchy potato wedges (regular)

1 Sodium

The sodium content of a meal or individual food is an indication of how salty it is. In salt — sodium chloride — it's the sodium which is implicated in high blood pressure. The recommended daily intake is a range of between 920 and 2300 mg. The lower limit is based on the minimum you need to be healthy. Above the upper limit you may risk high blood pressure if you're susceptible.

2 Fibre

Ideally you should eat 30 g of fibre a day to help guard against conditions such as constipation, heart disease, haemorrhoids and possibly bowel cancer.

3 Fat

One of the national dietary guidelines is 'eat a diet low in fat'. We analysed both the actual grams of fat each meal contained and calculated what percentage of energy in the meal is from fat. To analyse how an individual diet rates in the fat stakes, dietitians look at the contribution in calories fat makes to the total diet. The goal is no more than 30% so, for example, if fat accounts for 50% of calories, that diet is too high in fat. Some of these meals have such a high percentage of fat they'd make it very difficult to keep your overall diet within the 30% guideline unless your other meals were very low-fat.

Five grams of fat is about one teaspoon.

4 Protein (% total energy)

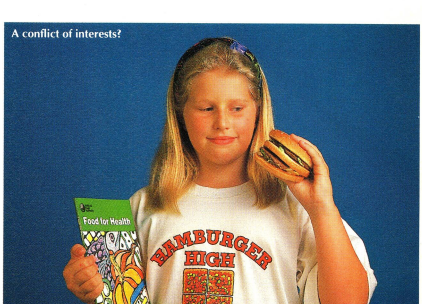
Most westerners eat far more protein than they need. The ideal amount represents 15% of the calories of your total diet.

5 Carbohydrate (% total energy)

In contrast to protein and fat, most westerners don't eat enough complex carbohydrate, such as cereals, rice, bread and pasta. Ideally carbohydrates should account for 55% or more of the calories of your total diet, with sugars (simple carbohydrates) no more than 15% and complex carbohydrates 40–45% or more.

Fast bucks

Our test of fast food showed once again that it's usually high in fat and salt and won't help you maintain a balanced diet. Is it appropriate its manufacturers sponsor school activities?



THE SCHOOL SPONSORSHIP debate encompasses the issues of school funding, the ethics of relationships between schools and business, the role of government education departments and the effects of advertising on children. Talk of fast food sponsors and you can add concern with children's health to that list: a volatile recipe indeed.

Some commentators bemoan the commercialisation of our schools — the fact they are encouraged to seek outside funding and may even be advised on how to market themselves. The more commercially sympathetic talk of this as idealism: "A rearguard action by idealogically driven, anti-commercial educationalists", to quote *Marketing* magazine.

Sponsorship is not new — local businesses have for a long time helped schools. Arnott's used to sponsor school sports, giving away biscuits as prizes, as far back as 1898. But the flavour of sponsorship has changed. Schools have been encouraged to become more commercially minded and some businesses have responded with slick marketing schemes. The NSW Department of School Education for one actively supports and encourages sponsorship deals.

Many parents' and teachers' associations see school sponsorship as a funding issue: that schools should be adequately funded so they don't need to seek extra money. Money gained by sponsorship fills a variety of otherwise unmet needs: classroom resources, computer equipment, sports events, outings and prizes, to name but a few. Should this be necessary?

Another concern is the way sponsorship money is handed out. As Richard Creswick, president of the NT branch of the Australian Council of State School Organisations, says, "It seems a school's OK if it has an entrepreneurial spirit — but should a school have to do that?" Is this fair on the children? Wouldn't it be fairer if companies gave to a central fund which was then distributed?

Who makes the decision to accept sponsorship, and under what terms, varies. In many instances the decision to seek sponsorship comes down to the principal; in others it's the school council or other parents' groups. Wouldn't it be better to have an independent body deciding?

Although the debate has been heated in NSW, parents and teachers in other states are equally concerned — many anticipating similar budgetary pressures will soon be taking their toll on schools in their own state. The SA Teachers' Union has prepared a draft set of guidelines on school sponsorship.

Examples of sponsorship which have raised concern include the Coles and computers deal (where schools collected Coles dockets for free computers), and soft drink manufacturers' provision of a fridge as long as it stocks their products. This article focuses on sponsorship by fast food chains.

The main programs to have received attention are:

■ **McDonald's** $800 000 sponsorship of school sports. This program is with the co-operation of the NSW Department of School Education. A spokesperson for the department said the scheme fitted its guidelines because no individual school was involved and, "There is no product

We must not be naive about [sponsoring] companies' motives and remember their bottom line is to sell products.

involved". The fact that the name McDonald's is synonymous with hamburgers does not sway them, nor that the company is involved with individual schools at a local level in other schemes.

■ In fact, **McDonald's** is involved in numerous ways with schools on a local level across the country. It may provide money in return for inclusion of its logo on school publications or encourage fund-raising nights at a local McDonald's restaurant. A letter from the NSW Department of School Education, which caused a furore, encouraged schools to contact McDonald's "as an indication of our support for McDonald's". It went on to suggest the schools invite McDonald's to their carnivals and speech nights and to involve it in fund-raising and in the school magazine.

Following the publicity, the department distanced itself from the letter, saying its tone was unfortunate; it reiterated that any school's sponsorship deal should only go ahead with the approval of staff and the community.

■ **Pizza Hut** has sponsored a program called *Sport It!* which teaches children basic sporting skills and rewards them with Pizza Hut vouchers for each stage completed. Research shows the scheme is successful in terms of children and teachers liking it — but why does the 'reward' have to be commercially based?

■ Until recently, **Pizza Hut** also ran a reading program called *Book It!*. Again, children were rewarded with a Pizza Hut voucher for reading an agreed number of books in the program. One concerned parent we spoke to said her daughter liked the badge and stars she received at each stage best of all, and there was no need for a commercial sponsor to supply those.

■ As for the other fast food chains we included in our test (see page 7): **Hungry Jack's** gives vouchers for sports awards when schools request them, "but not in any broad national sense"; **KFC** is not involved in any school sponsorship but would like to be; and **Red Rooster** also provides vouchers, considering itself "supporting future customers".

Warm fuzzy feelings

Schools are an attractive marketing ally. What could be a better healthy image than to be seen to be encouraging young people in sports? As the NSW Department of School Education says in its school sponsorship guidelines, "Sponsors gain the public recognition and kudos associated with having their name favourably linked to public education."

The deals usually include advertising of some kind: for instance, logos on school publications. Uniforms bought with the assistance of a sponsor will usually carry its logo too. The golden arches of McDonald's also appear on the state government letter mentioned above which encourages schools to build closer ties with McDonald's.

In the case of fast food companies, some schemes directly encourage an increased consumption of their product. For instance, the Pizza Hut pizzas from vouchers must be eaten at the restaurant; they can't be taken away — for most families this means everyone goes, not just the child with the voucher.

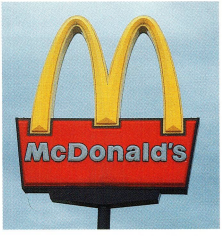
Even fund-raising ventures like McDonald's McHappy Hour involve eating — and buying — its hamburgers. In these schemes, during a designated time period, 10% of all sales will go to the school fund. The school is expected to promote the event and encourage staff, children and parents to attend and consume.

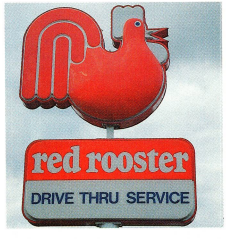
Dollars not sense

"Our concern is that the child has been ignored. The eye has been on the dollar" — Bev Baker, spokesperson for the NSW Federation of Parents' and Citizens' Associations.

Many others echo her concerns. Apart from the overall questionability of mixing education and marketing, one of the most obvious difficulties is when the values of a sponsoring company and those of the school curriculum are in conflict.

Taken to its extreme, a company can have a direct influence on what's taught in schools. For instance, in the UK, the British Egg Information Service sponsored resource material entitled *Health and Fitness — a Project Pack for Junior Schools*. It included a section on nutrition, listing foods in the main nutrient groups. Under protein, eggs appeared first while meat and poultry didn't get a mention. Eggs also appeared first in a





SCHOOL SPONSORSHIP: WHAT YOU THINK

WE HAD a good response to our request for opinions about fast food companies and schools — thanks to all those who wrote to us. Not surprisingly, due to recent publicity most were from NSW. Here are just a few:

■ "...Of course the main aim must be to sell more product ... yes, fast foods have their place, but not in the learning environment. Sport and poor nutritional foods is a conflict of interest."
Annette Brooker, Jewells, NSW.

■ "School sponsorship doesn't worry me very much. I don't like my children eating a lot of fast food, but it's unlikely school sponsorship would cause them to eat more of these products.
"Basically, I think the system helps our schools to provide equipment we would not otherwise have."
Cath O'Keeffe, Bowraville, NSW.

■ "I've heard that a lot of teachers' time is now taken up hunting sponsorship instead of teaching ... children have been out of class for long periods, trying to sell fast food chain lunches to teachers. Most teachers consider this sort of thing unethical."
Barbara May, North Rocks, NSW.

■ "...The Department of School Education shows a double standard when it produces a policy health document that promotes a healthy diet, then suggests that a fast food company sponsor sport."
Cheryl Bridge, NSW.

■ "As sponsorship stands at the moment the companies are supplying much-needed money to financially neglected, economically rationalised headmasters in return for advertising outside the school ... to carry to students and their families the message that the work or product of the company is endorsed by the teachers of that school ... Problems arise from any conflict between the curriculum and the sponsor's product."
Philip Paviour, Maroubra, NSW.

■ "Our governments, in the name of efficiency, seem to me to have deleted the word 'service' from the heads of consideration. By 'saving money' or more correctly 'cutting costs' they provide fewer and inferior services and it is this mentality that we should be debating — not this McDonald's rubbish!"
BS, Wentworth, NSW.

■ "Certainly one would expect schools would not seek or accept sponsorship from a tobacco company or a firearms outlet, but is there something morally reprehensible about a hamburger?"
Ross Higgins, Wilberforce, NSW.

■ "I feel schools should be independent entities and free from corporate involvement so they can stay independent. They must not be part of this subliminal advertising these large companies are getting in exchange for a few badges or awards and even in exchange for computer equipment."
Claudia Glas-Williams, Eumundi, Queensland.

list of foods rich in vitamins and minerals. The fibre section didn't mention cereals and grains and fruit didn't appear anywhere!

Teachers and parents are already feeling the pressure of subtle conflicts. As a PE teacher asks, "How can I teach the importance of healthy eating then send my kids up to the local hamburger joint for school fund-raising?"

Brochures from some of the fast food companies leave a lot to be desired in terms of nutrition information. The tack taken is to exaggerate good points and ignore bad ones.

For instance, in their literature both Pizza Hut and McDonald's talk of the five food groups:

"We've always believed in the basics — meat, potatoes, chicken, fish, eggs, bread and dairy products — selections from four of the five basic food groups recommended to maintain good health" (McDonald's). The vital word, 'balanced', is conspicuous by its absence. Fast foods are often high in fat and sodium, low in complex carbohydrate and in some cases low in fibre (see *Putting fast food to the test* on page 7 for details).

Is it healthy?

Sponsorship deals involving food seem to get the blood rising more than others. Barbara Smith, director of the Health Development Foundation in SA, sums up the problem:

"Our view in relation to food industry sponsorship in schools is that there is a similar problem to that of food advertising on television directed to children ... The problem is that virtually only the poor-nutritional-value food (which is also the most profitable) is advertised and promoted to children."

As she points out, and we would agree, it is not that a particular product is harmful in itself, but that the cumulative effect of advertising and sponsorship has the potential to push preferences towards less nutritious foods. In almost all cases, fast food is not a healthy option for regular eating, as the results of our test confirm (see page 7).

Where to now?

It is very tempting for schools simply to accept money from companies without considering the impact on children. We must ask what we are giving up in return for sponsorship. We must not be naive about companies' motives and remember their bottom line is to sell products.

Some people understandably question the fact that any businesses are involved in education at all. Others welcome the new equipment sponsorship money brings. At the very least the impact on the child must be fully considered. Any pressure on curriculum must be out of the question and the fact that children may be getting the wrong messages about nutrition or rational purchasing in general cannot be ignored.

CHOICE believes governments should take a strong line in controlling school sponsorship. If they continue to condone sponsorship, they should at least act in the interests of all schoolchildren — not just the ones who go to an entrepreneurially minded school. It is not adequate to leave these decisions at a local level. Some governments have guidelines, but these are open to different interpretations.

As our lives become more influenced by commercial interests we should be helping children become discerning consumers — teaching them how advertising and marketing work, for example. School sponsorship must be treated with caution as it threatens to blur the distinctions between information and promotion.

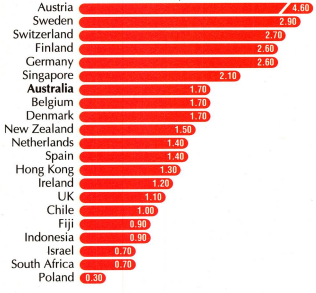
If you are a parent who is concerned about commercial sponsorship:

■ Tell your school principal.
■ Voice your concerns at school council or parents' organisation meetings.
■ Write to your local MP.
■ Write to your education minister.

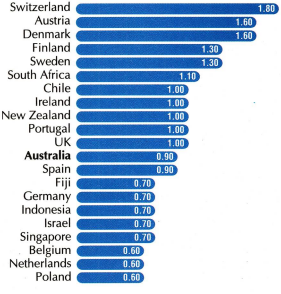
We'll keep watching developments in school sponsorship, and will be reporting on the issue in a wider sense in a future issue of *Consuming Interest*, our consumer affairs and policy magazine. ❑

SHOPPING AROUND

Bread (680 g)

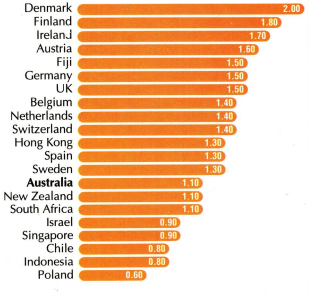


Flour (1 kg)



Rice (1 kg)

Sugar (1 kg)



All prices in Australian dollars (to nearest 10 cents), based on exchange rates quoted in the *Australian Financial Review*, February 9, 1994.

The invisible workforce

The Carers' Association of Australia estimates two million people in Australia look after a friend or a relative who's elderly, chronically ill or has a disability. These carers face long hours, low — if any — pay, and stress. What support systems are there to help them?

A carer assists a passenger aboard a Community Transport Shopping Service bus. Check what kinds of respite care and other services are available in your area to give yourself a much-needed break. (Thanks to Leichhardt Community Transport Group, NSW.)

ALL SORTS OF PEOPLE need help with day to day living: an elderly person may need a steadying hand for showering and dressing as well as help with shopping and managing personal finance matters; a child with disabilities may need help at meal times; a chronically sick person might need dressings changed and medicines given.

Families usually take the burden of responsibility in these cases — more often than not the female members. With the trend against institutionalisation, these family ties are becoming more and more demanding. Outside help, be it for cleaning or to give the carer a break, is increasingly important. But is that help forthcoming?

Judging by your letters, and the comments of many carers and organisations we spoke to, the situation around the country is patchy. In some areas where funding is low, there is little support. In other cases it's hit and miss as to whether you even hear of available help. Some carers' sheer determination means they have a good support network — maybe someone to help in the home for an hour each morning, a child/grandmother/dad sitter in the late afternoons and a weekend off once every six weeks. But it's a battle. As one carer we spoke to says, "It's a real business co-ordinating it all."

In addition, in some situations there's a lot of red tape to cut through in applying for assistance. As a mother of a 16-year-old with Down's Syndrome complains, "To get the disability pension for

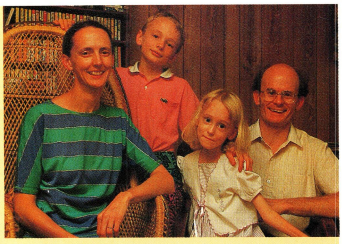
EMOTIONALLY HARROWING

Denise Mikula of Kalgoorlie, WA, looks after her six-year-old daughter, Sarah, who has muscular dystrophy. The first challenge she faced was "the initial shock of finding out our child was not normal. The six months or so of doctors and tests to find out what was wrong was quite harrowing emotionally."

Finding out about help available was also a problem: "Information would quite often come from people like other parents with disabled kids rather than from the professionals such as the GP or Early Childhood Centre," says Denise.

As for many other children with disabilities, hospital visits are a regular part of Sarah's life. Denise has had to take her to hospital in Sydney three times so far. "I stayed with her, which was great for her (she enjoyed hospital) but was very isolating for me. In a large city with no car, away from shops and friends, I would find myself wandering aimlessly around when she was asleep."

Last year Denise had a difficult time when she lost her usual supports: "My daughter got sick when my husband was away and our regular GP was on holidays for a month. I did see my GP's locum but he treated her like a normal healthy kid. He eventually pulled up his socks when I carried a limp, listless kid into his surgery one day."



Looking back, Denise now realises she needed some respite around that time and later, "but I didn't know where to go".

Despite the difficulties, Denise feels her family's experience has been pretty good. The quality of 'inside' help is vitally important, she says: "My husband and nine-year-old son are both fantastic support." A GP who knows Sarah well, who's willing to give her an appointment at the drop of a hat and visit her at home if necessary, is also "crucial".

her you've got to fill in endless forms. If you have a child registered as disabled, you shouldn't have to confront the bureaucracy each time. It should be automatic — they've got 16 years of files on the child!"

Similarly, there are increased problems if the person you care for doesn't fit into certain pigeonholes. Some people may find services being withdrawn as a child turns 18, for example; or they may find there really is no suitable extended respite care in their area for a person suffering from dementia.

There are various government programs which provide funding. One of the main ones is HACC (Home and Community Care). This is a jointly funded program — the Commonwealth Government matches individual states dollar for dollar. Money is distributed to community organisations in response to submissions, so the amount they receive often depends on the quality of their submissions. A well established Carers' Association, for instance, with experienced staff who've learnt the ropes, will attract more money than an inexperienced group — regardless of the needs of the people they are serving. The patchy nature of funding makes it difficult to say what is and isn't available in your particular area. What we can say is what to ask about. If a service is available you'll be able to track it down if you ask enough people. If it's not, who knows, perhaps your and others' persistence will pressure the decision-makers to provide it. The rest of this article outlines the types of help to look for; some ideas for contact points are listed on page 18.

I need information

When you find yourself in the position of a carer, the first thing you need is information — both about the help available to you, and about the condition of the person you're caring for.

Understanding your 'patient's' disease or disability will help you cope with it better. For instance, if you are bringing up an autistic child it's reassuring to understand his or her cool attitude to you is not personal, but because autistic children tend not to be affectionate. Or that Alzheimer's disease is progressive, with a number of well recognised stages — that sleeping disturbances are normal and that at one stage aggressive and perhaps bizarre behaviour can occur.

GPs, hospital doctors, social workers and organisations such as Carers' Associations, Councils for the Ageing and many specialist organisations are good starting points. Some can provide information and advice in the form of fact sheets on particular conditions, cassettes with interviews with other carers, or videos. For instance, under the HACC program the Commonwealth Department of Health and Human Services has put together a Carer Support kit which contains fact sheets on a variety of topics such as legal advice and carer health. Most organisations also refer you to other information sources. Carers' Associations can provide a service directory for your area: for example, the NSW's Central Coast one has numbers for community nursing, home help, service coordinators, home maintenance and transport.

In many cases diagnosis can take time. This is a difficult period for the carer because of uncertainty, and because of the way some funded help is structured — you have to fit into a pigeonhole of a particular condition/disease to qualify. And without knowing exactly what the problem is, it's difficult to know who to ask for help. Aged Care Assessment Teams (ACAT) are available in most areas to assess the disabilities and needs of elderly people. They comprise geriatricians, community health nurses, physiotherapists and so on. These and other organisations already mentioned can act as a gateway to services described below.

I need support

Organisations can often put you in contact with other carers — be it other parents bringing up a brain-injured child, or other people caring for someone with Parkinson's Disease. Support groups aren't for everybody but many people find them invaluable. Just being with a group of people who understand the particular problems you face can be a great help. Siblings' groups can also help brothers and sisters deal with the fact the sibling with a disability is often treated as 'special' and seems to get all the attention.

VERY LITTLE SUPPORT

Sue Mazur of Brisbane has had very little support in her role as carer for her 36-year-old husband, Frank, who has been disabled by a rare, progressive, terminal disease called amyloidosis.

The problems Sue, who's 31, faces are enormous: "I face constant stress, not being able to plan for the future, having to give up my ideals of what life would be like, ie husband, children, job, where we want to be in five years, etc."

The rarity of Sue's husband's disease means getting information and even treatment is very difficult.

"When my husband first was admitted into hospital for emergency surgery — requiring a four-month stay — I asked at the hospital whether there was reading material they could recommend that would help me deal with the shock, loss, stress, etc, and they could not recommend any. I also asked the community liaison nurses/officers whether they could refer me to a support group and unfortunately they could not find one I would be able to fit into," Sue says.

Community nurses helped Sue with Frank's dressings for about six weeks after he came out of hospital. "However, there are so many complex problems we have had to face that neither of us has been equipped to deal with. We have fumbled through by ourselves until depression has set in. My husband recently asked the hospital again to refer him for psychiatric assistance to help him deal with his anger and frustration. But as Frank's wife where can I obtain assistance? Who do I ask?"

Sue's and Frank's marriage has been strained by their experience. "I think the medical profession in general treats the disease and does not put enough emphasis on counselling, information and support groups for the patient and family to help them deal with their reaction to the chronic illness/disease/disability. I have heard so many times of marriages failing when one partner becomes chronically ill or disabled."

Although the hospital did provide trauma counselling, the in-house psychiatrist used to fall asleep during their sessions, leaving "us both feeling very let down".

Counselling may also be a welcome option, helping you cope at different stages. The particular difficulties faced by carers vary from case to case. But there are many consistent problems: lack of privacy, giving up an active social life, in some cases giving up a job and the financial security that brings. Carers constantly complain of stress and isolation and many will be having to come to terms with a lowered expectation of what this period of their life will hold.

Pat Jones, executive officer for the Alzheimer's Association, sums up the situation of caring for a person with Alzheimer's: "In most caring relationships you can maintain the relationship with the person cared for — the core of the relationship is unchanged. But with dementia, the quality of the relationship changes. There is a long period of grief and constant strain and no idea of how long it's going to continue — it could be five years, it could be 20."

In the case of Alzheimer's, counselling can help adjust at the beginning, cope with difficult behaviour, and when things get too difficult it can help deal with the traumatic decision to put someone into care.

You might also benefit from training, for instance to help you lift properly without damaging your back. Behaviour management skills are also important — tips on how to deal with an Alzheimer's sufferer who decides he's going to work at three in the morning will help you defuse such situations as well as save your sanity.

Organising legal and financial affairs while the person you're caring for is still compos mentis is important. You need to think about guardianship, who has power of attorney and who will be able to run financial matters. The Legal Aid Commission in your area will be able to help with a general enquiry. If you need to see a solicitor and you are on a low income you may be eligible for legal aid or advice at a reduced rate. Community Legal Centres will also offer free advice on some matters.

I need a break

Respite care gives you, the carer, a break from the daily routine of looking after someone. For some, this will literally be a 24-hour job. Alzheimer's sufferers, for example, tend to have disturbed sleep patterns — so the carer will too. You might need to catch up on your own sleep once a week.

Respite care also allows the carer to maintain good-quality caring — you just cannot do your best day in day out without a break. A break allows you to recharge your batteries and return to the task with more energy. It can be difficult to persuade people they should have some time away from the person they're caring for — especially the older generation, who tend to see looking after their spouse as a duty and that they will be giving in, showing a weakness, if they are not by their side at all hours.

Respite care comes in numerous forms:

- **Home respite care:** A paid carer comes to your home and looks after the person for a few hours while you go out.
- **Respite day centre:** In some cases these organise buses to pick up people from their homes and drop them off again. The exact times will vary from centre to centre. It could be 8 am to 5 pm, or maybe only 10 am to 2 pm.
- **Extended respite care:** Some centres have beds and may be able to take people for a weekend, or even several weeks. This usually has to be booked well in advance, and there may be waiting lists.
- Carers of children with disabilities may be eligible for **childcare funding** under the Commonwealth Department of Health and Human Services' childcare scheme. Again, community organisations may be able to advise.

Adequate and suitable respite care is probably the biggest gap in the carer support system. There are few places people can leave someone for more than a weekend. As for emergency care, a carer in Victoria tells her story: "When there's a crisis you are on your own. I was miscarrying and I desperately needed someone to look after my disabled

"YOU HAVE TO BE A BIT PUSHY"

"The most important thing I have found in being a carer is not to be afraid to open one's mouth. There are services and help available but sometimes one has to ask and get a little pushy. It's no good sitting at home and being timid expecting people to find you." That's the advice from Eileen West of Duncraig, WA, who cares for her 87-year-old mother with advanced Alzheimer's-type dementia.

"Through my GP I found out about local day care facilities for the frail aged. They are run by our local council and are funded by HACC (Home and Community Care). Mum attended for one day per week for three years. The charge was only $2; transport and tea breaks were provided."

Things changed, however, when Eileen's mother became incontinent: "Mum only had one 'accident' and I was asked to make alternative arrangements. This was a shame as at that stage it was traumatic for her to meet strangers and go to new surroundings."

They found a day care centre run by Anglican Homes, which was excellent until Eileen's mum had a stroke which left her paralysed on one side and in a wheelchair for months. Eileen resorted to home respite care and has six hours a week arranged by the Alzheimer's Association. "I split this into two three-hour sessions, which I use to attend my keep fit classes. This is my stress relief."

The same carer steps in while Eileen goes to her monthly Red Cross carers' support group, which she says is "very important to me as a social outlet. I now have only one friend I see on a regular basis. I don't have the time, money or energy to keep up with the rest."

Once a fortnight Eileen has another day off when a sitter from the council community options scheme stays with her mother. "I use this day to treat myself. Lunch with a friend, art gallery exhibition, cinema, etc. It is important not to feel guilty about doing something for oneself."

Immediately after her mother's stroke Eileen needed help with showering her. But as soon as she could, she managed on her own: "The nurses were never here before 10 am and it was usually between 11 am and 1 pm. I could have several nurses during the week and I felt to some of them Mum was just a thing to be washed."

Instead of help with showering, she now has home help, mainly for cleaning, two hours a fortnight.

Equipment in various forms also makes life easier: "A local care service provided a wheelchair commode, bed safety rails, alterations to the shower and raised the bed. They also provided an electric hoist to assist with lifting."

When Eileen and her husband need a longer break Eileen's sister comes over from the UK to look after their mother. Some good friends also ring up occasionally and say they'll come over and look after her for a weekend.

"So as you can see, I cope quite well," Eileen concludes.

daughter. I couldn't get any help. I was pushed from pillar to post. Eventually a caring neighbour stepped in."

The other problem is suitability. Take dementia patients, for example. Many respite centres are designed for the frail elderly, but a dementia patient is often physically active and may wander off — security is much more significant than for most elderly people.

In some areas, 'interchange' may be available. This is where a host family will look after a child with a disability for, say, one weekend a month, giving the caring family a break.

I need practical help

Some home help such as cleaning or help with showering is available through HACC; again, Carers' Associations will be able to put you in touch with help if social workers and doctors can't. Other options include meals on wheels, home maintenance, community nursing and para-medical assistance such as physiotherapy.

One of our readers wrote saying she used the ambulance service to lift her husband when he fell. "Luckily I had been informed that the ambulance officers would come and help me get him off the floor day and night ... very few people know this is available to them." We're not sure if all ambulance services are so accommodating, but it's certainly worth finding out.

Adapting your house and obtaining specialised equipment can also make your life as a carer much easier. This is particularly true when you need to lift frequently, where hoists may help — whether to move someone onto a commode from a bed, or to a bath. Funding through schemes such as PADP (Program for Appliances for People with Disabilities) may be available to help with such equipment — you can access them through the social work department of major public hospitals. The line between help for the carer and help for the cared-for is a fine one. Usually, anything that helps the cared-for also benefits the carer by taking some of the load.

Independent Living Centres in each state (except the NT and Tasmania) have a vast display of all sorts of equipment and daily-used tools which make life easier for a person with disabilities. The centres are staffed by trained health professionals who can show you how to adjust equipment to fit properly and advise on the options available. You can make an appointment to see and try the equipment in the centre. The NSW Independent Living Centre displays around 2500 items ranging from chairs, incontinence equipment, specially designed clothing (for instance with Velcro fastenings rather than fiddly buttons) and medical dispensers to bars which can be fitted to baths for steadying, anti-pressure cushions for wheelchairs, and bowls which will keep food warm for longer while a slow eater finishes a meal.

I need money

What about financial help? If you've had to give up your job, can you claim any benefits? There are three avenues:

■ To qualify for a **domiciliary nursing care benefit** from the Commonwealth Department of Health and Human Services, the person you are caring for must need help with basic daily tasks such as bathing, dressing and going to the toilet. He or she must be at least 16 years old, be living with you and have a long-term illness or disability.

■ Whether or not you are eligible for the **carer pension** depends somewhat on the person you're caring for. He or she must need your help for everyday tasks, or need constant supervision; be living at home; and the problem must be long-term. He or she must also be getting a pension or benefit from the Department of Social Security or Veterans' Affairs unless they haven't lived in Australia long enough to qualify.

■ People caring for a child who's dependent and who has disabilities may be eligible for a **child disability allowance.** You must be caring for the child at home and usually getting Family Payment and giving "substantially more care and attention to the child ... than that required by a normal child of the same age".

Is the support adequate?

Rather like the schoolboy who wrote home to his parents complaining of the school food, "It's revolting and there's not enough of it", support systems for carers are not always suitable and are thin on the ground. There is not enough extended respite care, and not enough specialised respite care. The financial benefits are often paltry and by no means compensate for a carer giving up a job. The Carers' Association is also calling for better treatment by the tax system.

Added to that, carers often don't even hear about what *is* available. Health professionals such as doctors and social workers are frequent points of contact with the carer and seem the obvious route of information dissemination. Yet we've heard of people who have struggled alone caring for a spouse for three years without even hearing of a Carers' Association in their state.

The support a carer receives shouldn't depend on their entrepreneurial spirit — or how much time they have to chase these things. We'd like to see more assistance in obtaining and co-ordinating help and more recognition of carers' unfailing work. After all, if the carer's health fails, who's going to care for the carer? ❑

CONTACTS: START HERE

KNOWING who to talk to and who can help is often difficult. Here are some ideas to help you in your quest for information, advice and support. The Carers' Association finds it reaches many people through the radio — so listening to your local radio station may help.

State by state

Carers' Associations — and Councils on the Ageing if you are one of the many looking after an elderly person — are good starting points. Some have directories of services available in your area; others may have kits including cassettes and fact sheets.

■ **ACT:** Carers' Association: (06) 288 4877;
Council on the Ageing: (06) 282 3777.

■ **NSW:** Carers' Association: 008 817 023; Council on the Ageing: (02) 247 3388; country callers 008 449 102.

■ **NT:** Carers' Association: 008 817 901;
Council on the Ageing: (089) 481 511.

■ **Queensland** Council of Carers: (07) 843 1401;
CARE-line: 008 017 223; Council on the Ageing: (07) 857 6877.

■ **SA:** Carers' Association of SA: 008 815 549;
Council on the Ageing: (08) 232 0422; country callers 008 182 324.

■ **Tasmania:** Carers' Association: (002) 31 5507 or 008 818 776; Council on the Ageing: (002) 28 1897; Aged and Disability Care Information Service: 008 806 656.

■ **Victoria:** Carers' Association: 008 814 215;
Council on the Ageing: (03) 416 0822; country callers 008 136 381.

■ **WA:** Carers' Council of WA: 008 810 668;
Council on the Ageing and Carers' Network: (09) 272 2133.

Specialist groups

Specialist groups may be able to offer more specific information, for instance about the condition or disease the person you care for suffers from, or about support groups in your area. Some have national offices and include:

■ National Council on Intellectual Disability: (06) 247 6022.
■ Continence Foundation of Australia: (03) 416 0857.
■ Head Injury Council of Australia: (06) 290 2253.
■ National Brain Injury Foundation: (06) 285 1759/282 2880.
■ Australian Brain Foundation: (03) 882 2203;
outside Melbourne: 008 333 469.
■ Alzheimer's Association: (02) 878 4466.

Government departments and agencies

Which ones have anything to do with carers?

■ **Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA):** Offers services aimed at veterans, war widows and widowers and their carers, such as emergency short-term home relief and carer support networks.

■ **Financial Information Service (FIS):** Part of the Department of Social Security (DSS), has 72 offices around Australia. It helps people on a DSS or DVA pension make the most of their money.

■ **Department of Social Security.**

■ **Department of Health and Human Services.**

■ **HACC (Home and Community Care)** is a funding program for carers' services. Money is distributed to community organisations.

Who else?

There are numerous self-help and other specialist groups around Australia. We can't list all their different state offices here, or even all the groups, but this list should give you some ideas of organisations worth contacting. Sometimes the names may be slightly different between states. Your local Carers' Association may have a contact phone number for other groups, and of course they'll be in the phone book. Here are some ideas, listed in alphabetical order:

■ Arthritis Foundation.
■ Association of Relatives and Friends of the Mentally Ill.
■ Autistic Association.
■ Cancer Societies/Foundations/Councils.
■ Cleft Lip and Palate.
■ Council for Disabilities.
■ Deaf and Blind Society.
■ Down's Syndrome Association.
■ Early Intervention Centre.
■ Ethnic Communities Councils
■ Independent Living Centre.
■ Migrant Resources Centre
■ Multiple Sclerosis Society.
■ Muscular Dystrophy.
■ Parkinson's Syndrome Society.
■ Program for Appliances for People with Disabilities.
■ Spastic Centre.
■ Spina Bifida Group.
■ Stroke Support and Self Help.
■ Technical Aid to the Disabled.

PERSONAL EMERGENCY ALARMS

Emergency alarms let people such as the elderly, sick or disabled know they're only a button's press away from help if they need it.

YOU MAY NOT have heard of them. They're not widely advertised but in many ways they're the ultimate '90s product. Elderly or disabled people may be concerned (or their friends and relatives may be concerned) that some mishap might befall them while no-one else is around and no-one will notice their cries for help. These alarms are a modern cry for help. Emergency alarms effectively give people more independence.

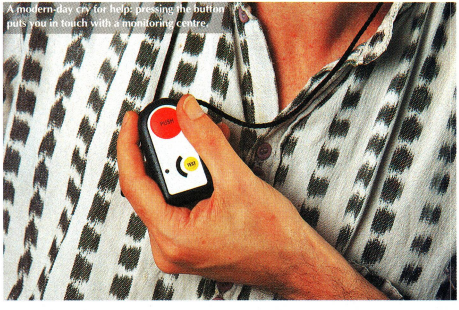
PEACE OF MIND

There are three types of alarm on sale for use in an emergency, all usually worn (often as a pendant) or carried, and activated by the owner when he or she needs help. One type lets out a loud noise when it's activated and hopefully attracts the attention of a neighbour or passerby. It can be taken anywhere but there's no guarantee someone will respond to a call.

The second type is telephone-based. When you set it off the pendant sends a radio signal to the main unit, which then calls a sequence of telephone numbers with a recorded message saying you need assistance. There are no ongoing costs associated with these alarms apart from the cost of the phone calls, but a problem could arise if none of the numbers answers or if one of them has an answering machine and the alarm thinks it's made a successful call.

WHAT WE TESTED

We tested alarms connected to monitoring services for this report. One model, the **MEDALERT**, was dropped from the test because it was undergoing design changes. Another, **LIFE-ALERT**, was omitted because the monitoring service (run by a Commonwealth Government department) refused to let us be connected to its system — because of the nature of the product we had to let these services know who was making the calls and so couldn't test anonymously as we normally would do. Other models were omitted because they weren't widely available, which gave us six alarms for this test.



A modern-day cry for help: pressing the button puts you in touch with a monitoring centre.

The third type is also telephone-based, but has a unit that calls a monitoring centre, where a person then deals with the problem. This sort of service is likely to be more reliable in unusual circumstances but it does involve ongoing costs. It's this type of alarm we tested for this report.

There are other alternatives. You could live with an able companion, but it's not always easy to find a suitable person. You could also carry a mobile phone around with you, although even the smallest models would be a burden to keep with you all the time, they're also more difficult to use in an emergency and don't have all the features of these alarms.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

You won't find emergency alarms in your local supermarket; mostly they are sold directly by the distributor. We have included some contact numbers for alarms with monitoring services in the table called *Emergency alarm monitoring services* on page 23. You can also contact your local health service or Independent Living Centre, which may be able to give you information on other services (including contacts for other types of alarm) in your area. When you call up a distributor, stress you want a demonstration.

Try the pendant out around your neck. Does the strap or chain dig into you at all? Are any other sorts of trigger available (ones that clip on your pocket or around your wrist, perhaps)?

If you have more than one telephone in your house it's important the alarm be installed correctly or it may not work if a handpiece is left off the hook somewhere. Ask if the person installing the unit is an Austel-licensed cabler.

If you have any special requirements, ask what additional features are on offer — for example, some units can be connected to smoke alarms, others to inactivity monitors (pressure pads or movement sensors which raise the alarm if you don't walk over them or past them for a while).

For units with a monitoring service, ask about the medical knowledge of the operators. Most services have people with first aid knowledge answering the phones; some have fully trained nurses. If you have a medical condition, you may find this reassuring.

You might also like to ask how many people are on duty at different times of the day. All the services that responded to our survey have operators on 24 hours a day. If the monitoring service is run by a security company, the operators will be dealing with security calls as well as

emergencies. However, the security systems usually have a system for prioritising calls and in the services we surveyed emergency calls are given the highest possible priority. You should check this if you're concerned.

Problems

If emergency alarms were meant for any other purpose we might have said they were all fine in most situations. But because they are designed to be used in an emergency we felt it was important they work in virtually any situation. For instance, if someone leaves the phone off the hook the alarm should still be able to get through to the monitoring centre. It needs to be properly installed for this to happen. There are special types of connection which give the alarm unit priority over any other use of the phone line when it's activated. However, two of the models we tested weren't designed or programmed properly to implement this.

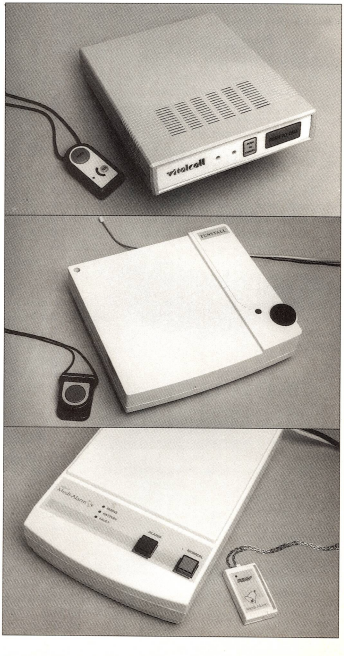
The alarm will disconnect any other phone line user in the house when it is activated, but needs to allow a second or so before dialling the monitoring service to allow the disconnection to occur. The MINDER tries to dial immediately, so if a phone has been left off-hook it keeps getting an engaged tone and can't get through.

The SMART CALLER works fine when running on mains power (all the alarm units we tested have battery back-up), but if the power is cut off problems can occur. When running off the battery it has the same problem clearing the phone line as the MINDER; and if the battery runs low and the power is still cut off the phone won't work at all (power failures don't normally affect phone lines). The latter problem can be avoided in normal use by having an ordinary phone in the house as well.

We consider these problems serious. However, both manufacturers have said they will be fixing them in future models. If you have other extensions in your house you can perform a simple test to check the problem doesn't exist in your model: call the monitoring service to let them know you're about to make a test call, take all the phones in your house off-hook until they give a busy tone, press the button to make a call, and if it sounds successful hang up all other phones and wait for a reply.

PROFILES

Models are listed in rank order based on how many features the alarm had of the three we thought most important (voice communication, a shower-resistant pendant and detection of phone line failure), and their ratings for the pendant's operating range, voice contact range (where applicable) and back-up battery life. Prices shown don't include ongoing costs such as monitoring service fees and phone calls.



VITALCALL MK VII

Price: $279

Good points

- Immediate voice contact with monitoring centre even if you're a few rooms away from the main alarm unit.
- Very good pendant range.
- Water-resistant pendant can be used in the shower.
- All operators at the monitoring centre (which receives calls from anywhere in Australia) are trained nurses.

Bad points

- Doesn't detect phone line failure.

TUNSTALL PIPER PORTAL

Price: $599–$649

Good points

- Immediate voice contact with the monitoring centre even if you're a couple of rooms away.
- Detects phone line failure.
- Can do inactivity monitoring, although you need to check the monitoring service offers this as well.
- Can be programmed to make automatic test calls.
- Pendant is very light and battery is checked every time it's used.

Bad points

- Pendant can't be used in the shower.

MEDIALARM

Price: $395–$600

Good points

- Pendant can be used in the shower.
- Detects phone line failure.
- Can operate multiple pendants, which can be individually recognised by the monitoring centre.
- Can be programmed to make automatic test calls.

Bad points

- No voice contact.
- Back-up battery won't last longer than a day.

Important features

■ One feature we feel is important is **voice communication.** If you've fallen over and can't get up it's probably quite distressing to hear the phone ringing out after you've set the alarm off, leaving you to lie there wondering when or if help will arrive. Voice contact lets you tell the monitoring service exactly what's gone wrong (provided you're within range and capable of speaking) and they can tell you when help will arrive.

■ A pendant that can be **worn in the shower** is also important. You wouldn't want to take it off while you shower, then collapse and not be able to reach it.

■ You also probably want some sort of warning if the phone line fails. If it doesn't work neither will your alarm. At least if you know the phone line is dead you can try to get it fixed or make alternative arrangements if it's going to be down for some time.

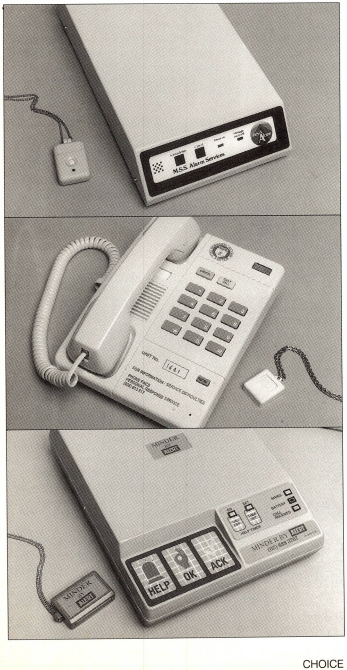
None of these alarms had all three features; the **MINDER** had none of them. See the profiles below and the table overleaf for details of which alarms had which features.

WHAT TO BUY

VITALCALL Mk VII	$279
TUNSTALL Piper Portal	$599–649
MEDIALARM	$395–600
MSS Neva-Alone	$250–300

Our results tell you which alarms are technically superior. However, this is only part of the story. You also need to know which alarms are backed up by the best service and this is something we can't test for (it would require setting up fake emergency situations, which we didn't feel justified in doing). We did ask the service providers questions about their service and the answers are in the table *Emergency alarm monitoring services* overleaf. By using information in this and the test results table you should be able to work out which service (and alarm) best meet your particular needs.

Two models, **SMART CALLER** and **MINDER**, were left out of our *What to buy* list because of the problems we discovered during testing. However, both manufacturers claim new models shouldn't have these problems, so if you're interested in them for any features they offer, make sure you make the check suggested opposite when you get a demonstration.



MSS NEVA-ALONE

Price: $250–$300

Good points

■ Very small pendant.

Bad points

■ No voice contact.

■ Pendant can't be used in the shower.

■ Back-up battery won't last longer than a day.

■ Doesn't detect phone line failure, although operators at the monitoring service should notice if the automatic daily test call is not made.

OK WHEN MODIFIED

SMART CALLER

Price: $400

Good points

■ Immediate voice contact with monitoring centre even if you're a couple of rooms away.

■ Pendant is very small and light and can be used in the shower.

■ Phone included in the alarm system can be used as an ordinary or a hands-free telephone

■ Can do inactivity monitoring if the monitoring service offers this.

■ Can be programmed to make automatic test calls.

■ Has a lot of optional features such as room temperature monitoring and control, and being able to unlock the front door remotely.

■ Can operate multiple pendants, which can be individually recognised by the monitor centre.

Bad points

■ Present model won't work properly in some situations (see *Problems* above).

■ Doesn't detect phone line failure.

MINDER

Price: $150–293

Good points

■ Very good pendant range.

■ Very good back-up battery life.

■ Can be programmed to make automatic test calls.

Bad points

■ Present model won't work properly in some situations (see *Problems* on above).

■ No voice contact.

■ Pendant can't be used in the shower.

■ Doesn't detect phone line failure.

Emergency alarm units

Brand/model (in rank order)	Manufacturer/ distributor	Origin	1 Alarm system price ($)*	Pendant weight (grams)	2 Voice contact	3 Built-in phone	4 Shower-res pendant
VITALCALL Mk VII	Vitalcall	Australia	279 *(A)*	39	✓		✓
TUNSTALL Piper Portal	Tunstall	UK	599–649	25	✓		
MEDIALARM	Ness Security	not stated	395–600	46			✓
MSS Neva-Alone	MSS Security	not stated	250–300 *(A)*	32			
OK WHEN MODIFIED							
SMART CALLER	Meldmore	not stated	400	22	✓	✓	✓
MINDER	ADT	Australia	150–293 *(A)*	47			

* Prices shown are figures quoted to us by the distributors in February 1994.

(A) Establishment/installation fee. Alarm must be returned to the distributor when service is no longer required.

(B) The alarm automatically makes a daily test call to the monitoring centre so the operators will notice within 24 hours if the line is down.

(C) Dials the monitoring cente within an hour or so.

(D) Dials the monitoring centre only when the battery is running low after a power failure.

1 Price

This is the upfront price for the alarm system. You will also have to pay a regular charge for the monitoring service (see *Emergency alarm monitoring services* opposite). In many cases you don't actually buy the alarm, but pay a one-off establishment/ installation fee which entitles you to keep it as long as you retain the service; it remains the property of the distributor. You may be able to get a pensioner discount on the alarm price and the monitoring charge, so it's always worth asking about it if you think you might qualify. Other options you might like to consider are renting, and selling the unit back to the distributor once you no longer require the service.

2 Voice contact

These models have a microphone and loudspeaker so the monitoring service can speak straightaway to the person who set the alarm off without their having to come to the phone. See column 9, *Voice range*, for results of how well it worked.

3 Built-in phone

The **SMART CALLER** comes with a built-in telephone handpiece. One advantage of this is that it can be used as a 'hands-free' phone. All the other alarms are connected to your existing telephone.

4 Water-resistant pendant

We tried out the pendants claimed to be water-resistant by putting them under the shower for 15 minutes. None of them appeared to leak and all worked afterwards.

5 Unique pendant ID

If more than one person in the building is using the alarm this feature identifies which pendant was triggered to the monitoring service. This helps the operators decide what action to take in an emergency.

6 Lost phone line warning

Both the alarms with this feature will beep regularly until the phone line is reconnected. Since the alarm can't work without the phone line it's important the user knows when this has happened. The **MEDIALARM** also lights up a sign marked 'FAULT' and contacts the monitoring centre as soon as the line is reconnected.

7 Lost power warning

All the alarms except the **MINDER** will automatically put a call through to the monitoring centre if the power fails. All have a back-up battery so will keep working for a while without mains power (see column 10, *Back-up battery life*). In some cases the call is made straightaway, in others within an hour or so. The **MINDER** only puts a call through to the centre when the back-up battery starts to run low as well.

The **MEDIALARM**, **MINDER**, **TUNSTALL** and **VITALCALL** all give an indication to the user (like a flashing light or beeps) although the **MEDIALARM** is the only one that stands out. It would be quite easy to miss these warnings on the rest.

8 Pendant range

The pendants were tested in a suburban house with a large backyard. All worked throughout the house and were then tested in the backyard at various distances from the phone. The **MSS Neva-Alone** wouldn't work at all further than 25 m from the receiver and was rated only 'fair'. The **MEDIALARM** and **TUNSTALL** had some degree of success at 40 m but were becoming unreliable so were rated 'good'. The **MINDER** and **VITALCALL** worked perfectly at this distance and rated 'very good'. **SMART CALLER's** distributor introduced a new lighter pendant just as we finished our testing. We were unable to test it for range, but the old pendant rated just 'fair'.

9 Voice range

The three alarms with voice contact were also tested for the range of their voice communication. The **VITALCALL** was clearly the best: provided the user had reasonable hearing he or she could hear the monitoring service and be heard from a few rooms away. The **TUNSTALL** and **SMART CALLER** weren't as good but worked well from one or two rooms away.

10 Back-up battery life

All the alarms have a back-up battery that will last at least eight hours if the power is cut off, so none was considered poor. Any that lasted longer than 24 hours were considered 'good', and the **MINDER**, which was still going strong after 48 hours, was considered 'very good'.

FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Our tests were performed on standard models, but many of these alarms can be customised for people with particular disabilities. You should discuss special requirements with the distributor before you buy one or sign the contract.

An occupational therapist with the Independent Living Centre said the pendants were all much the same, although the **TUNSTALL** probably had the edge because the button was large, easy to press and unlike other units didn't need to be held down for a second or so to activate the alarm.

For people with limited mobility the **SMART CALLER** has an option which allows you to answer the telephone by pressing the button on the pendant and speaking 'hands free'.

5 Unique pendant ID	6 Lost phone line warning	7 Lost power warning	8 Pendant range	9 Voice range	10 Back-up battery life	Brand/model (in rank order)
		✓ *(C)*	very good	very good	good	**VITALCALL** Mk VII
	✓	✓ *(C)*	good	good	good	**TUNSTALL** Piper Portal
✓	✓	✓ *(C)*	good	not applicable	fair	**MEDIALARM**
	(B)	✓	fair	not applicable	fair	**MSS** Neva-Alone
✓		✓ *(C)*	see note 8	good	good	**SMART CALLER**
		✓ *(D)*	very good	not applicable	very good	**MINDER**

Emergency alarm monitoring services

Service (in alphabetical order)	Phone number	Units used	Service cost ($/month)	Coverage	11 Medical knowledge	12 Daily test call	13 Inactivity monitoring	14 Alternative triggers
CARELINK	008 038 008	Tunstall Portal, Tunstall Premier *(A)*	20	ACT, NSW, Qld, Vic *(B)*				
MEDALERT	(03) 745 2477	Medalert *(A)*	25	All states	✓	see note 12		
MINDER	(02) 688 3767, (03) 819 4455, (07) 852 2044	Minder	30	NSW, Qld, Vic	✓			
NATIONCARE	(02) 417 5522, 008 063 338	Medialarm, Tunstall Portal, Tunstall Premier *(A)*	18–20	All states	✓		✓	✓
NEVA-ALONE	(02) 764 4399	MSS Neva-Alone		All states except NT	✓	✓		✓
PERSONAL ALARM CALL SYSTEM (PACS)	008 813 617	Smart Caller, Sectrol *(A)*	16.50	NSW, SA, Vic *(B)*		see note 12	✓	✓
SECURICALL	(02) 633 1177	Securicall *(A)*	26	All states	✓	✓		✓
VITALCALL Personal Response	(02) 930 1222, 1800 690 808	Vitalcall Mk VII	28	All states	✓✓			✓

(A) This unit was not tested for this report *(B)* Service is planning to move into other states soon.

What to look for on page 19 has details of questions to ask monitoring services before you commit yourself to a particular one. We asked a number of services the same questions and the results are summarised in the table. It can be used to help you choose a service or as a yardstick to compare other services not included.

11 Medical knowledge
A tick in this column means all the operators manning the switchboard have first aid knowledge; two ticks means they are all registered nurses. However, operators don't really need any medical knowledge; usually the action required is just to call a relative or friend, but you may find it reassuring to have someone who understands any medical problems answering the call.

12 Daily test call
A tick indicates the monitoring service calls the user every day (or every three days in the case of the **MEDALERT**) to check everything is OK. Other services encourage their subscribers to call up regularly themselves so they get used to using the pendant. **PACS** says nearly all its clients are on a scheme in which they call up every day at a nominated time; if they fail to do so the monitoring service contacts them to find out if anything's wrong.

13 Inactivity monitoring
Sensor pads can be set up in a place you'd normally cross regularly (outside your bedroom door, for instance) and if the pad isn't triggered for a certain length of time a call is automatically put through to the monitoring centre.

14 Alternative triggers
People with mobility problems may find it difficult to use the pendants, so alternative triggers can be used, such as pull-cords or blow-tubes.

Hearing aids

Promised you a miracle?

The good news is that hearing aids are improving rapidly with new technology. However, they won't bring back your hearing, and getting the best out of one can take some effort. They are also expensive — too expensive to 'wear in your top drawer'.

THE TITLE OF THIS ARTICLE was going to be 'How to buy a hearing aid'. However, for perhaps nine out of 10 people who are likely to need one, the answer is 'Don't'. The government will give you one free — and a good one at that.

Much has transpired in the hearing aid business since the last time we looked at it back in 1987 (CHOICE, October '87). At that time there was a lot of antagonism between various sections of the industry, some of it quite bitter. In among it all was the government service, provided by the National Acoustic Laboratories (NAL), which didn't enjoy the best reputation for prompt delivery or up-to-the-minute technology. In fact, an Industry Commission Report in 1990 recommended the whole operation be sold off to the private sector. The government decided to keep it just the same.

Libby Harricks is president of Deafness Forum Australia, a member of the board of directors of the Australian Hearing Service and, until very recently, was also president of SHHH. All in all, rather a full life, especially when you realise she fulfils all these roles with almost no hearing at all. Though profoundly deaf in both ears, she is an enthusiastic user of extremely powerful hearing aids and the full range of assistive listening devices. Combined with her resilient attitude, these have enabled her to prevent her severe impairment from becoming a severe disability.

Reconstituted as a statutory body called the Australian Hearing Service (AHS), it now provides hearing assessments and fits aids free of charge in 52 permanent hearing centres and 70 other 'visiting centres' throughout Australia. This year it will have a budget of $76.2 million (a figure that is likely to grow significantly), fit perhaps 90 000 aids directly and pay for another 30 000 through accredited private providers.

Everyone under 21 years of age is eligible for this free service, as well as some war veterans, pensioners with health benefits cards, some other social security recipients and dependants of all these. Early last year this eligibility was dramatically expanded to include part-pensioners, in accordance with a commitment given in the 1992 federal budget. This lifted the number of people who can use the service by 380 000. With the introduction of the Commonwealth Government 'Seniors' Card' for low-income superannuants in July this year, a further 200 000 or so people will be eligible: anyone whose income is low enough (up to $365 per week as at March 1994) to qualify them for even some part of the old age pension.

There is not a little anguish in the private sector that this spells "creeping government monopoly". It is estimated that from July, in excess of 90% of people who need a hearing aid will qualify for a free one from AHS. It is planned that eventually almost all aids fitted by AHS will be a brand it helped develop in

a joint venture with a Swiss firm and a Brisbane manufacturer, setting up a local industry which now exports hearing aids. This is by no means the whole story, however.

While some industry representatives argue there is a secret agenda to wipe out the private sector, the AHS and the Commonwealth Government refute this. What they have done, in fact, is to institute a scheme of accreditation of private hearing service providers to whom they can refer the overload of AHS clients. Two reasons are cited: to help cope with the massive increase in demand generated by the expanded AHS eligibility and to maintain a healthy, viable private sector industry.

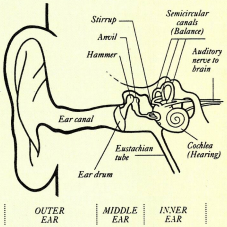
Indeed, industry sources that have gained that vital accreditation admit that business is up, way up: some say by as much as 200 or 300%. The trouble in their view is that this increase reflects only 'throughput'. They are fitting a lot more hearing aids but not making nearly as much money on each one as they did before. That's because the AHS has set a schedule of fees it pays to the private providers for treating first-time AHS clients: about $850 for one ear or $1320 for both, known as a binaural fitting. Since some hearing aids can retail at over $2000, there is a clear disincentive to fit the more expensive (and otherwise profitable) aids. The real concern, though, is that this is resulting in providers spending insufficient time with each client. In the words of one audiologist in private practice, "If you let a client sit down, you've wasted time."

TYPES OF HEARING LOSS

MANY THINGS can result in hearing impairment. Some hearing loss is **congenital** (present at birth or developing later). Other kinds are **acquired**: they are caused by something later in life.

Hearing loss can be caused by anything that interferes with the functioning of any part of the ear, and the types of loss are classified in terms of which parts of the ear they affect. In general, hearing loss is conductive, sensorineural or some mix of the two.

Conductive loss results from damage to or blockage of the outer or middle ear: anything that hinders or prevents sound from being conducted into the inner ear. It commonly leads to a loss of loudness and is often helped by medical or surgical treatment. Common causes are blockage of the ear canal by wax or a foreign body, infections, perforated ear drums (resulting from injury, infection or exposure to extremely loud noise) and otosclerosis (a bony growth condition in the middle ear).



Because some sound passes straight through the skull to be picked up by the inner ear, conductive hearing loss doesn't usually cause more than moderately severe impairment. Because in many cases it is mainly the quantity of sound rather than the quality that is affected, people with conductive loss can benefit greatly from the amplification a hearing aid provides.

Sensorineural loss results from malfunctioning of the cochlea in the inner ear or the auditory nerve, which carries its messages to the brain. This can be caused by a variety of things including diseases like meningitis and Menière's disease, viruses like mumps and measles, some drugs (called ototoxic drugs), head injuries, and exposure to excessive noise for long periods — the most common cause of hearing loss — combined with the aging process. Sensorineural loss tends to be permanent and untreatable by medical or surgical means. The fact that it affects the clarity of sound received as well as the loudness means the benefits of hearing aids are more problematic, but they can still help.

Where to go

One of the problems with hearing loss is that its onset is usually gradual, so people often fail to realise they are affected. Have you noticed a growing trend recently for people to mumble or slur their words? Do you find you can hear people but struggle to understand much of what they say? Do you notice this sort of problem more when the environment is noisy or people don't face you as they talk? Have you tended to stay home and avoid social gatherings more and more lately, only to find that those at home constantly ask you to turn the TV down? These are all classic symptoms of hearing loss.

For people who suspect they have hearing loss or, more likely, whose families and friends let them know loud and clear, the first stop is often the family doctor. Your GP can examine your ears and soon tell if your problem is a minor one such as wax build-up that can be dealt with right there in the surgery. If it is not, the chances are he or she will refer you to an otorhinolaryngologist, known to you and me as an **ear, nose and throat specialist**, or ENT for short.

The ENT specialist will diagnose the cause of your hearing loss, with particular attention to any pathological reason for it that might be more serious than the loss itself. For instance, a tumour pressing on the auditory nerve will commonly cause hearing loss and the cause obviously needs to be dealt with as well as the effect. If a more intrinsic problem with your hearing is found and it is treatable, the appropriate medical or surgical solution will probably be recommended. See *Types of hearing loss* above for more information about the causes of deafness.

As part of the range of diagnostic tools employed by the ENT specialist, a complex hearing assessment may be ordered. Some ENTs perform these themselves but many send the patient off to an AHS hearing centre to be tested if they're eligible, or to a private audiologist if they're not. **Audiologists** are hearing professionals with university training in assessing hearing loss, identifying its type and location and fitting appropriate hearing aids to help rectify it. Some 200 work for AHS, others work in hospitals and research and there are many more in the private sector.

An alternative is an **audiometrist**. These people do not have university-level qualifications, though they may have a certificate from either Sydney Institute of Technology or Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. What some also have is many years of experience in fitting hearing aids. Audiology is a comparatively recent profession in Australia, dating from only the early seventies. Before that, the work, outside that performed by the old NAL, was carried out for decades by audiometrists.

In the view of some people who work for support groups for the hearing-impaired, the drawback with audiometrists — and it applies also to private-sector

audiologists — is that they make their living by selling hearing aids. The advice you're getting comes to you in a commercial context. That's not to say it's necessarily bad advice, only that there is a strong incentive for the provider to sell you an aid. Indeed, some hearing aid retail outlets, which employ mainly audiometrists, have exclusive ties to — in some cases they are owned outright by — hearing aid manufacturers.

A further alternative for the non-AHS-eligible, and the one recommended by some in community groups as the only source of guaranteed 'commercial-free' advice, is the audiology department of a public hospital. Most major hospitals have them, though some are desperately understaffed and have long waiting lists. Access to them varies state by state and hospital by hospital. Most are open to outpatients, though some require a medical referral and some charge fees. Some go as far as dispensing hearing aids. Phone your local hospital and ask about these conditions. If you can get in you will be tested by an audiologist, who will give you a copy of your audiogram: the graph showing the extent of hearing loss and in what frequency ranges it occurs.

Armed with this, you can shop around any number of private providers or retailers for the right aid to help with your particular pattern of loss. Some provide free trial periods, money-back warranties of up to 90 days and after-sale service, including maintenance of the aids and training in their use as well as other hearing rehabilitation — especially important in more severe cases. If they give you a hearing test, some will not charge for it if you proceed to buy a hearing aid from them.

Somewhat disturbingly, two different hearing aid providers told us that while they do have warranty periods during which they will replace or refund if the client is dissatisfied, they never tell clients about this in advance! They argued that knowledge of a money-back guarantee is a disincentive to people to make the required effort to adjust to their aid and learn to use it effectively.

Representatives of hearing aid manufacturers said they were shocked by this. One pointed out that the companies underwrite consumer guarantees by providing virtually unconditional 90-day money-back guarantees to retailers. He added that customers who could not get satisfaction were welcome to bring their problems directly to the makers. "We'll sort out the problem ... we stand behind our products," he said. The message for consumers is to get clear information on all these points before you agree to buy any hearing aid.

Victorians have a unique facility called the HEAR Service, a branch of the Victorian Deaf Society. It is unique inasmuch as it provides a full range of hearing testing, aid fitting and rehabilitation services, conducts community education campaigns, is open to everyone (it does charge for its services but at low rates) and is funded by the state government, though for how much longer is uncertain. Other states have only self-funding volunteer groups to fill this role.

Help is available

Some people say there is still a tendency among some doctors — not all of whom are thoroughly grounded in the potential benefits of hearing aids and other devices — to tell people that their hearing loss is inevitable and they are "just getting old". While this may be true, if someone tells you that "you can't do anything about it", you should realise that what he or she really means is "*I* can't do anything about it".

Help is available. Hearing loss is the second most common disability in the community, with perhaps 10% of the population affected — though one study puts it as high as 19% or almost one person in five. What's worse, by the age of 65, that figure is more like 30%. If you are one of those with a hearing loss, there is a range of things you can do about it, of which obtaining a hearing aid is just one.

HEARING HEALTH: A LOW PRIORITY

Most major health funds cover some of the cost of a hearing aid in their 'Extras' or 'Ancillary' tables, though they vary widely state by state and fund by fund as to how much they pay, qualifying membership periods and coverage of repairs and replacements. Payouts for aids range between $300 and $600.

It is somewhat remarkable that while many funds also cover the services of chiropractors and osteopaths — and some even the cost of fitness, stress management and 'lifestyle' courses — none provides any coverage for the cost of audiological services. Only the aid itself is covered. According to the NSW manager of Medibank Private, Graham Cannon, this reflected purely commercial decisions about what benefits were in demand and would therefore help to make the insurance packages marketable.

What is a hearing aid?

IF YOU cup your hand behind your ear, the sound waves you are trying to hear are partially funnelled into your ear and some amplification results. That is essentially what every hearing aid sets out to do. There is nothing miraculous about them (with the exception, perhaps, of cochlear implants — but they are another story). All hearing aids consist of a microphone to pick up sound, an amplifier to make it louder and a speaker to deliver it into your ear canal. These days there is a variety of extras and sophisticated technologies the aids can incorporate, but it's worth remembering that this is the essence.

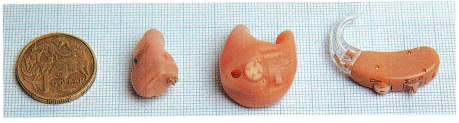
As far as appearance and method of wearing them goes, there are three basic types: behind-the-ear (BTE); in-the-ear (ITE) and tiny in-the-canal (ITC) aids which fit unobtrusively right down into the 'ear hole'. The different types are suitable for different kinds of hearing loss and the personal preferences of the user. Some other specialist types are available but are less common, such as aids built into spectacles and aids worn on the body.

In general, while the developmental thrust by the manufacturers has been to harness modern electronics to create ever smaller and less visible aids, smaller is not necessarily better. Simply, the amount of circuitry — and hence features such as T-switches to help you hear your phone, TV or hifi — that can be built into a device is dependent on its size. Because BTE aids are bigger, they can be more powerful (if needed), use longer-lasting batteries and the controls are easier to manipulate — especially for elderly people with restricted manual dexterity. They are also less subject to wax build-up and problems of acoustic feedback, where some signal from the speaker leaks back to the microphone, creating a highly unpleasant squeal.

The trend toward 'small is beautiful' is opposed by many therapists and people in organisations for the hearing-impaired. In seeking to hide the aids, they argue, the makers are reinforcing a widespread and hugely destructive stigmatisation of hearing impairment. Advertising of the 'they'll never know you're wearing it' variety is singled out for especially scathing criticism: "marketing stigmatisation", as one hearing rehabilitation specialist put it.

Of all forms of disability, hearing impairment is perhaps the least tolerated in our society. There is a tendency to impa-

The size of it: the coin shows the scale of these examples of (left to right) in-the-canal (ITC), in-the-ear (ITE) and behind-the-ear (BTE) aids. Of course, for that dollar you could get one of BHA's Hearing Help Cards, described by one user as "the best hearing aid I ever bought".



tience with partially deaf people that does not apply to, say, paraplegics or blind people. This is partly because there are no visible signs of the impairment, so that sufferers are often regarded as 'slow' or inattentive or even stupid. There are strong associations of the word 'deaf' with 'dumb' and 'old'. As a result, many people are extremely reluctant to acknowledge their hearing loss or to seek help, leading to ever greater social isolation. As one audiologist put it, "Communication is the linchpin of our social interaction. Even a quadriplegic can at least express his or her frustration. The hearing-impaired are just isolated completely." None of this is helped, it is argued, by putting cosmetics ahead of other considerations in hearing aid design.

Organisations for the hearing-impaired are keen to promote a counter-trend, encouraging people to acknowledge their impairment and assert their right to consideration. Developments such as vividly coloured, highly visible BTE aids worn by some American delegates to a conference in Sydney last year are welcomed. Hearing aid moulds are even available in joke formats these days, a blinking eyeball staring out of the ear being one startling example. A 'Hearing Help Card' available from Better Hearing Australia has large, clear printing which reads, "I HAVE A HEARING LOSS. PLEASE FACE ME, SPEAK CLEARLY, DON'T SHOUT..." Costing one dollar, it was described by one user (who admits to handing it over to make a point even when he has heard clearly) as "The best hearing aid I ever bought".

On the other hand, manufacturers argue that the smaller devices are perfectly suitable for many people, especially those with mild to moderate loss. Who has the right, they say, to tell a 16-year-old to endure the social trauma of wearing an obvious BTE aid to school, for instance?

What's available?

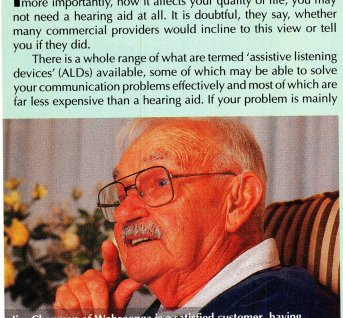
There are hundreds of hearing aids available in Australia today. This represents a highly competitive industry and a wide range of consumer choices. The only concern is that, given the highly technical nature of the products and testing and fitting procedures, this choice may be devalued in the absence of sound, commercially neutral advice.

As part of the Australian Hearing

ALTERNATIVES AND EXTRAS

IT IS ARGUED by some who work in the hearing impairment field that, depending on the nature and degree of your loss and, even more importantly, how it affects your quality of life, you may not need a hearing aid at all. It is doubtful, they say, whether many commercial providers would incline to this view or tell you if they did.

There is a whole range of what are termed 'assistive listening devices' (ALDs) available, some of which may be able to solve your communication problems effectively and most of which are far less expensive than a hearing aid. If your problem is mainly with the phone, you can get a home phone with volume control from Telecom, free of charge. If it's hearing the TV that gives you trouble, inexpensive devices worn around the neck that let you hear it without blasting everyone else out of the room are available. There are amplified, flashing and vibrating doorbells, pagers and alarm clocks. Deafness Resources Australia has a range of low-cost ALDs, sales of which fund its services and printed material for the hearing-impaired.



Jim Chapman of Wahroonga is a satisfied customer, having received his hearing aids free from AHS: they have improved his life, he said. However, he wasn't aware of extras such as all the benefits of T-switches, indicating something of a shortfall in the rehab area.

Community groups and hearing health workers are also energetic advocates of the 'T-switch'. A hearing aid fitted with a T-switch has special telecoil circuitry that enables it to work in conjunction with a whole range of devices and facilities — especially valuable for people with more severe levels of loss. If you are sitting in a public hall that is fitted with an induction loop you can switch your aid to the 'T' setting. It will switch off its normal microphone, cutting out all the surrounding noise, and tune you in directly to the speaker at the front. Many telephones, cinemas, churches, banks, colleges and universities, etc, have these or similar facilities. (They are called PALS: places with assistive listening systems. There are also FM radio, infrared and hard-wired systems.)

Making a phone call from a city underground railway platform would be out of the question for many hearing-impaired people. A T-switch makes it possible. Again, the trend to smaller in-the-ear aids is criticised for leaving out T-switches or causing them to be so underpowered as to be next to useless. One hearing aid user told us, "Assistive devices are the way to go, the way to get into your hearing aid", and that a T-switch is the key to learning to see your aid as your best friend.

Service's accreditation procedure, private providers seeing AHS clients can only fit them with a device that AHS has approved. Between 200 and 300 have so far been approved, though AHS is at pains to point out that non-approval does not necessarily mean a hearing aid is no good. Some don't meet certain technical specifications which don't affect quality, while other aids have not even been submitted for approval. All these aids are produced by around 16 companies. Some are imported, some are assembled here from imported components and there is a limited amount of local manufacture as well.

The holy grail for hearing aid design has long been the elimination of background noise, chiefly approached by suppressing some sound frequencies and boosting others. Unfortunately this is far from being fully achieved and any advertising that claims or implies that it has should be treated with deep scepticism. Quite simply, the main form of background noise is often human voices, so if it's a voice you want to hear, no filter can screen out the others and leave only the one you want.

There have, however, been significant advances and the current 'state of the art' is known as the 'digital programmable hearing aid'. Using the same digital sound technology that underlies compact discs, makers have recently produced aids with high-quality sound and sophisticated circuitry that allows them to be closely matched to the individual's pattern of hearing loss using computers. Some have up to three different 'memories'. These are pre-programmed settings you can choose from, depending on the noise environment in which you find yourself. Some even come with nice, compact remote controls to enable volume and other settings to be manipulated easily without removing the aid or having to struggle with its tiny controls, highly appealing for elderly people or others with dexterity problems. These are also very expensive.

The aids now being dispensed free by the AHS are of this advanced type and are acknowledged even by private-sector competitors as the latest technology, though somewhat grudgingly. Remote controls are also provided when there is a need.

Who sells hearing aids?

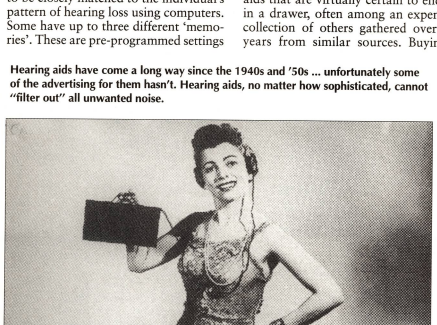
The hearing aid industry has been plagued over the years by some decidedly shady operators. Stories abound of 'travelling salesmen' roaming the countryside with some rudimentary testing equipment and a smooth sales pitch: "snake oil merchants preying on the elderly...", as one industry source put it. One particularly notorious character is said to have worked his way through rural Victoria and NSW, setting up in a tent at country shows and offering 'Free Hearing Tests'. He would recommend an aid, take your order and your deposit and disappear. (He was last heard of in Queensland.)

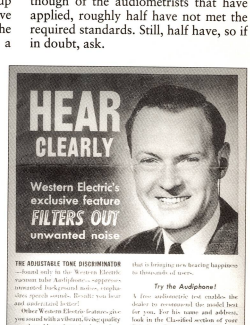
Only slightly more satisfactory are salespeople who actually provide the aid before moving on. These are the hearing aids that are virtually certain to end up in a drawer, often among an expensive collection of others gathered over the years from similar sources. Buying a hearing aid in such circumstances is most emphatically not recommended. The lack of proper facilities like soundproof rooms and suitable testing equipment makes the worth of any hearing test under conditions like this highly dubious, and the lack of any proper instruction in the use of the aid is a recipe for failure. Offers of hearing tests from door-to-door operators are equally suspicious.

Back in 1987 we were concerned that there was nothing to prevent anyone setting up shop as a hearing aid dispenser and administering hearing tests. On the face of it, that has not changed. There is still no legal constraint on calling yourself an audiometrist, or even an audiologist for that matter, no matter how unqualified you may be. (This is no trivial matter. One audiologist told us that on two or three occasions in the past year he had detected the signs of acoustic tumours and referred the client to doctors immediately.) What has changed is the structure of the industry itself, and there is broad agreement that the lower-echelon 'snake oil merchants' have been fairly well cleaned out.

This is partly because the recent AHS accreditation system has driven out many operators who could not make the grade (though it is emphasised that lack of accreditation does not necessarily imply lack of skills or dubious practices — some perfectly good practitioners may not even have applied). AHS has accredited both audiologists and audiometrists, though of the audiometrists that have applied, roughly half have not met the required standards. Still, half have, so if in doubt, ask.

Hearing aids have come a long way since the 1940s and '50s ... unfortunately some of the advertising for them hasn't. Hearing aids, no matter how sophisticated, cannot "filter out" all unwanted noise.

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by the makers of BELL TELEPHONES

Industry lifts its standards

It must be said that the improvements are also partly due to an effort to lift standards by the industry itself through bodies like the Hearing Aid Audiometrists' Society of Australia (HAASA), the Hearing Aid Council of Australia (HACA) and the Australian Society of Audiologists (ASA). HACA is a business and employers' body which receives complaints from the public and, it says, investigates them. HAASA, which represents individual audiometrists, settled for a system of internal registration after years of lobbying state and federal governments to introduce one. It can and would, it says, expel a member for professional misconduct but has never had to since it formed in 1984. Registered members must complete one of the approved TAFE courses within three years of entering the industry. HAASA works with TAFE on designing the courses.

The government registration idea was finally passed over, they were told, because of 'insufficient complaints from consumers'. (The NSW Department of Consumer Affairs receives only 20 to 30 complaints a year about hearing aids. Given that it gets around 22 000 in total, it doesn't regard this as significant.) This sits oddly with other evidence. The ASA, for instance, as part of its preparations for a submission to the Victorian government for a licensing system, has collected over 120 case studies of consumer problems in the hearing health industry in the past 12 months. President Dr Robert Cowan believes low complaint levels may be attributable to many of the poorly served people being elderly: not the type to take matters up with consumer affairs or perhaps even unaware of their right to do so. In many cases, he says, they may not even be aware they have been poorly dealt with.

The nature of some of these problems is cause for serious concern. There were cases of hearing assessments yielding inaccurate results so that inappropriate hearing aids were fitted. There was a significant number of cases of inappropriate testing by non-audiologists to whom the clients had been referred by a doctor. Other serious worries included instances of misleading advertising of the qualifications of people performing hearing tests, and people who were eligible for the free AHS service but were not told. Even more alarming were cases of children being referred for surgery and actually being anaesthetised on the basis of erroneous test results.

What to be aware of

Consumer groups for the hearing-impaired such as Self Help for Hard of Hearing People (SHHH, pronounced 'shoosh') and Better Hearing Australia run resource centres where you can get support and advice about hearing aids and other impairment management strategies and try out various assistive listening devices (ALDs) — see *Alternatives and extras* on page 27. They make some strong suggestions for people who are in the market for a hearing aid.

■ Check the credentials of anyone offering to conduct a hearing test. The need for sophisticated equipment, soundproof facilities and proper professional training is stressed. Some people who sell hearing aids have none of these things. A disturbingly high proportion of people who buy a hearing aid do not go on to become successful users, often resulting in the feeling that they have been misled or 'ripped off'. There is general agreement that the standard of aids on offer in Australia today is very high, so these failures in use seem to be the result of unrealistic expectations (sometimes generated by misleading advertising) and inadequate training in effective use of the aids.

There is a tendency for people to approach the purchase of an aid in the way they might buy glasses: they are looking for an instant and total correction for their impairment. Glasses can provide that for blurred vision; hearing aids can do nothing of the sort. They require work and effort. Severely impaired people rapidly lose listening skills, which must be relearned in conjunction with the successful use of aids.

■ A hearing aid that wholesales for $250–$350 might be sold to you for anything up to $1000. For this you will probably get the hearing test, fitting, several follow-up visits for minor adjustments and continuing contacts in the event of any problems, but it is worth asking precisely what you are getting for what you pay.

Rehabilitation workers and hearing groups stress the need for a comprehensive aural rehab program to teach people how to manage their hearing loss. This may include speech-reading (which includes lip-reading) and other strategies to facilitate hearing, and even assertiveness training to help people overcome the stigma and crippling social isolation common to hearing impairment. A hearing aid is only a part of such a program and users need patience and training to get used to them. Many of those who miss out on such training are the people who 'wear their aids in the top drawer' and feel they have wasted their money. If you are buying an aid you should ensure you get this help. Ask for details in advance of the rehab you will be given. Shop around. Some audiologists have excellent reputations in this area.

■ Don't forget batteries for the hearing aid. They cost from $1.50 to $1.80 each and in some cases need replacing as often as once a week. If you have a binaural fitting (one aid in each ear) multiply this by two. For a fee of $25 per year, AHS clients get full maintenance of their aids and all batteries supplied. If you are buying from a private supplier, ask about these costs beforehand. ❑

GETTING HELP

All numbers given are ordinary phone numbers except where a telephone typewriter is indicated by 'tty'. This is a device which enables deaf people to communicate in written messages via phone lines. Some numbers are either/or, indicated as 'voice/tty'.

■ **Australian Hearing Services (AHS):**
Adelaide — (08) 237 6144
Brisbane — (07) 864 9351
Canberra — (06) 257 6530
Darwin — (089) 46 3493
Hobart — (002) 20 5580
Melbourne — (03) 285 8402
Perth — (09) 323 5823
Sydney — (02) 411 4533.

■ **Better Hearing Australia (BHA):**
NSW — (02) 744 0167,
tty (02) 744 7271
Queensland — voice/tty (07) 844 5065
SA — voice/tty (08) 232 2996
Tasmania — (002) 28 0011
Victoria — (03) 510 1577,
tty (03) 510 3499
WA — voice/tty (09) 328 7938.

■ **Deafness Forum** (can provide referrals and information for all deafness and hearing impairment enquiries):
(06) 281 3934, tty (06) 281 3156.

■ **Deafness Association of the Northern Territory:** voice/tty (089) 45 2016.

■ **Deafness Resources Australia Ltd** (non-profit supplier of low-cost ALDs, literature and information):
(02) 550 9521, tty (02) 560 3868.

■ **SHHH:**
Sydney — (02) 449 9144,
tty (02) 44 7586.

■ **HEAR Service:**
Melbourne — (03) 650 3981,
tty (03) 657 8152.

DRIVELINES SPECIAL

CAR ROADWORTHINESS: DEFECTS IN THE SYSTEM?

Do vehicle inspections improve the safety of the cars on our roads or are they just a waste of everyone's time and money?

VEHICLE SAFETY affects everyone. In the 1980s a total of 29 716 people were killed on Australian roads and a further 298 000 ended up in hospital because of road accidents. While the annual road toll relative to population has steadily fallen over the last 20 years, a 1988 estimate put the cost of traffic accidents to the community at about $6.5 billion per year. With figures like these any action that can be taken to further reduce the risk of car accidents will be a major boon to the public.

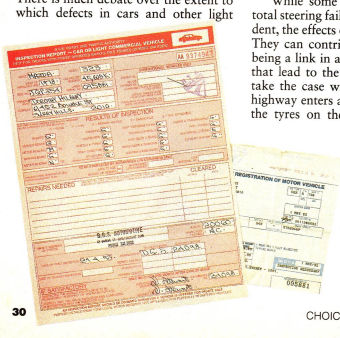
One weapon in the crash prevention armoury is the use of annual roadworthiness inspection schemes to check for and eliminate potentially dangerous defects in cars and promote safety by encouraging owners to maintain their vehicles regularly. But are these schemes necessary and, more importantly, do they give us safer roads?

Do defects cause accidents?

There is much debate over the extent to which defects in cars and other light vehicles cause or contribute to crashes and injury. Bob Gardener of Vicroads says police statistics in Victoria indicate around 2% of fatalities are the direct result of mechanical failure and perhaps 5% have car defects as a contributing factor in the accident. A study completed in the USA in 1977 by the Institute for Research in Public Safety at Indiana University took a close look at 2678 accidents and concluded that vehicular factors were a "probable cause" in about 13% of cases. A similar study in the UK between 1970 and 1974 by the Transport and Road Research Laboratory put the figure at 8%.

The results of these studies, however, need to be looked at with care. Many experts warn that these figures can paint a false picture of the role played by car defects. The investigation of road accidents is a complex process and attributing a cause can often be difficult because the damage to the car can be extensive.

While some major defects, such as total steering failure, can initiate an accident, the effects of most are more subtle. They can contribute to an accident by being a link in a chain of circumstances that lead to the crash. As an example, take the case where a driver on a wet highway enters a sharp bend too fast. If the tyres on the car are worn or the brakes are uneven the driver may lose control and crash into a tree. What is the cause of the accident? Is it excessive speed, the wet road, driver misjudgment, the tree or the defective tyres or brakes?



The 'pink slip' cars in NSW over three years old need to get from an authorised inspection station every year before their registration can be renewed. Does an annual inspection system like this really make cars any safer?

In reality it is a complex interaction of all these factors. At Wheels '92, a conference held in Sydney to discuss the safety, environmental and economic implications of Australia's aging car fleet, Sven Asander, Chief Engineer for AB Svensk Bilprovning, the Swedish inspection company, had this to say: "There is nearly always a multitude of interacting factors, of which no single factor can be given more importance than others, but the elimination of any of them, such as a vehicle defect (bald tyres, uneven braking) could mean that the accident would have been avoided."

The level of involvement of defects is hotly debated, but there is agreement that problems with tyres and brakes come out well on top as the most likely defects to be a factor in an accident. Unfortunately, these defects are difficult to monitor with an annual inspection alone. The UK report says, "These defects are of a kind which can develop over a relatively short space of time and arise because of a lack of regular maintenance by the owner of the vehicle. An annual check such as required by the [UK] vehicle regulations clearly provides no guarantee that defects will be detected and remedied as soon as they ought. Only checks made more frequently, possibly at weekly intervals, can do this."

Do current inspection systems work?

In an opening address to the Wheels '92 conference, the then Minister for Land Transport, Bob Brown, pointed out that: "Many studies have attempted to assess

whether mandatory annual maintenance inspections of cars are a real and cost-effective means of reducing the road crash toll. Analyses in Australia fail to show any significant correlation."

Only the ACT, Northern Territory and NSW currently have annual car inspection systems. The effectiveness of the various systems is difficult to assess but many experts feel these schemes would be hard-pressed to justify the costs involved.

Noel Matthews, Executive Director of the National Public Works Council and a former Assistant Director of the Federal Office of Road Safety, feels there is no evidence to indicate that cars in states which have annual inspections are better maintained than those in other states. He says annual inspections don't work, are expensive to run, waste a lot of consumers' time and don't ultimately lead to safer roads.

Peter Tinson, the Senior Manager for Transport Regulation in the ACT, disagrees. He feels the ACT scheme has led to a progressive improvement in maintenance of the car fleet and believes there is some anecdotal evidence to link this to a fall in the accident rate. While there is no specific statistical evidence to support this, preliminary figures for 1993 from the Federal Office of Road Safety show the ACT as having a significantly lower fatality rate per vehicle-kilometres travelled than any other state last year.

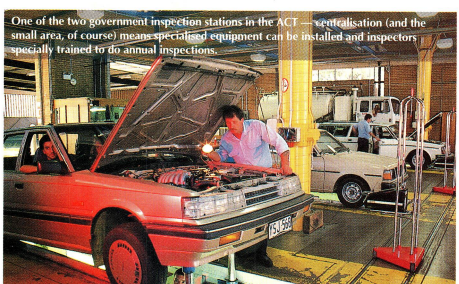
Authorised inspection stations — a conflict of interests

A unique aspect of the system in the ACT is that the inspections are centralised and carried out at one of two government stations. Because the system is centralised, inspectors can be specially trained and special equipment can be installed so that a thorough inspection can be carried out. The centralised system is also easier to audit and keep a check on.

In contrast, NSW and the NT use a chain of authorised inspection stations (AIS), which are usually service stations or repairers accredited to carry out the annual inspections. A potential problem with the AIS system is that, in practice, the same operator will generally:

- Carry out the periodic inspection.
- Find and document any defects.
- Subsequently repair those defects.
- Finally, authorise his/her own repairs and issue a roadworthiness certificate.

The potential for a conflict of interests is clear. If an unscrupulous operator wants to drum up some business he/she could list repairs that weren't strictly necessary in the hope of getting the work. On the other side of the coin, an operator who is very busy or who wants to do a favour for a good friend or customer may only do a cursory inspection and pass a car that should not have been certified as roadworthy.



One of the two government inspection stations in the ACT — centralisation (and the small area, of course) means specialised equipment can be installed and inspectors specially trained to do annual inspections.

The UK Consumers' Association's magazine, *Which?*, recently put the British inspection system to the test by having a number of vehicles in a known condition tested by several garages. The British system is similar to that in NSW and the NT in that it uses authorised inspection stations. *Which?* reported that 15 out of the 36 garages failed its test car for items which were in fact acceptable under the current standards. They weren't able to say whether this was because of incompetence, lack of clarity in the standards or the garages trying to get extra work. Whatever the reason, it was clear that consumers presenting the same cars to these garages would have ended up paying for unnecessary repairs.

Irrelevant standards

Aside from the quality of the inspections themselves, the standards used to examine cars have been called into question. In July 1993 the NSW Road Traffic Authority (RTA) started to phase in a new inspection system, dubbed 'Safety Check', which will fully replace the old system by July 1994. A brochure produced by the NSW RTA had this to say about the reasons for the introduction of the new scheme: "Safety Check is designed to test the safety features of today's sophisticated motor vehicles. The old scheme was introduced in 1939 and its techniques for checking have hardly changed in nearly sixty years. Advances in technology have made a vast difference to the vehicles on our roads. An up-to-date method of inspection was needed to test modern vehicles."

Frank Howarth, General Manager of Vehicle Registrations for the NSW RTA, feels the old scheme suffered from vague and irrelevant standards and compliance with some test criteria was either not appropriate or impossible. Under the old rules, for instance, brakes were subject to a visual inspection of the component parts. In newer cars this would be virtually impossible without taking the braking system completely apart.

In an effort to simplify testing, Safety Check has been based more on performance testing than on examining component parts. The important car systems, such as brakes, will be tested directly rather than by examination of the parts. There has also been an attempt to get rid of some of the 'nitpicking' rules and to concentrate on safety issues. Some of the old rules regarding surface rust and small chips in the windscreen which don't directly interfere with the driver's vision have been eliminated, as they don't necessarily make a car unsafe. Other rules have been redefined to make them less open to interpretation from garage to garage.

Frank Howarth also believes the Safety Check system will be less open to abuse by garages. The auditing has been tightened up and potential inspectors will have to undergo an approved training course in the new inspection techniques before they are accredited. The RTA envisages each AIS will be visited about twice a year in order to assess its performance, and if there is any doubt about the quality of the inspections, the

RTA has the power to recall a number of the cars recently tested by the garage and reassess them to check the garage hasn't been passing cars that have faults.

Another improvement is the introduction of a simple-to-use portable brake tester which gives a computer printout of brake performance. A copy of the printout will be attached to the customer's roadworthiness certificate and another copy will be kept for examination by RTA officers on their regular inspections. This ensures both the customer and the RTA can see that a proper brake check has been carried out.

Whether Safety Check improves the level of inspections in NSW remains to be seen. The full system won't be in operation till July and it will probably take several years for any results to become apparent. One immediate effect, though, is the increase in the cost of an inspection from $18 to $23.

Random testing

While NSW's new Safety Check attempts to address some of the major problems of the old system, it is still based on an annual look at a car and does not address the problem of ongoing maintenance. Many experts see random roadside inspections, similar to the random breath testing programs, as a more promising and cost-effective way to go.

Sven Asander, again from his Wheels '92 address, said, "Any periodic inspection system needs to be supplemented by 'surprise' inspections of vehicles in traffic. Otherwise it is possible to neglect the vehicle at all other times, and concentrate all service and maintenance to the periodic inspections."

Random roadside inspections, if implemented properly, can raise the awareness of motorists of the need for constant inspection and maintenance of vehicles throughout the year, and not just at the time of inspection. After all, the responsibilty of maintaining the safety of a car is the legal obligation of the owner and driver.

Peter Tinson says a pilot project in the ACT, involving random roadside inspections by government inspectors done in conjunction with the police, found that many of the cars which were caught with minor defects on the roadside were found to have more serious defects when put over the pits at the inspection station. He felt this was evidence to support an extension of the random inspection program in the ACT.

Greg Swan, of the Queensland Department of Transport, thinks random inspections can be effective if properly run. They need to be extensive enough to create the impression that a car is likely to be inspected at any time, but run in a way that is fair to motorists. In practice random inspections are not truly random because the inspectors tend to target cars which look likely to have defects. Noel Matthews, while supporting a well-run random inspection program, warned of the danger of such schemes becoming just another avenue for "picking on young blokes".

According to Frank Howarth, random roadside inspections can't currently be done in NSW because it would contravene state laws. There would need to be a change of legislation by the NSW parliament before any such system could be implemented.

The Road Traffic Authority inspection pits in NSW. Cars don't have to go over the pits for their annual inspection, just be checked by 'authorised inspection stations' — often your local garage. There's plenty of potential for conflict of interests.

Different strokes...

Each state may have its own view on the form of inspections but the basic aim is the same — to make sure the cars on the road are in a safe condition. While the aim may be the same, different states have different ideas on what makes a car unroadworthy. A Canberra couple who recently moved to Victoria found this out first-hand.

They took their ACT-registered Holden Commodore with them when they moved to Melbourne. As required by the Victorian Government, they took the car to an authorised Victorian inspector for a roadworthiness certificate so they could register it in that state. Much to their surprise the car was rejected on faults, with an estimated repair bill of around $1500. Problems were cited with items such as the handbrake, wiper blades, oil leaks in the steering and engine and problems with the windscreen. As an experiment, before any repairs were done, they took the car up to Canberra and had it inspected by the ACT authorities. Mysteriously, all the faults had disappeared except for the oil leak in the engine.

Why are components considered faulty in one state and not another? Is the car safe to drive in Canberra but unsafe on Victorian roads? If both inspections were carried out conscientiously, then clearly the standards between states need to be made more consistent, and perhaps there is need for a more national approach to our road safety.

A warm glow

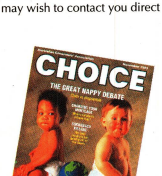
The role played by vehicle defects in accidents is disputed. If we err on the side of caution and assume that minimising the number of defects in cars will save lives and curb injury, then an effective scheme of inspections needs to be in place. Whether the annual inspections in the ACT, NT or NSW have any effect on accident rates when compared with the other states is unknown, but perhaps some effort needs to be put into finding out. Are consumers benefiting from these schemes or are they just being taken for a ride? In-depth studies just don't exist to guide us in either direction on this issue. With limited resources at our disposal and lives at stake, it is important to know what our money is buying.

Bob Brown in his Wheels '92 address summed it up as follows: "There is ... a nice warm glow from regular vehicle inspections, which may explain the resources devoted to this activity in some administrations."

If inspection schemes can cut our road toll this 'warm glow' should be extended to all states. If not, the money fuelling this glow might be better spent lighting some more cost-effective roads. ❑

LETTERS

Send your letters to **CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204**. Where possible, please include your daytime telephone number, as we may wish to contact you direct for more information or to discuss your comments and queries.



I THINK THAT I WILL NEVER SEE A NAPPY LOVELY AS A TREE

I read with interest your article in November CHOICE on nappies. Although my own children were all in the cloth nappy era of the '60s, I feel a very real concern these days for a totally different reason, one which you have not looked at in your article: the disposable nappy is so often disposed of by simply throwing it away when its users are out of doors and away from convenient containers. I have travelled pretty extensively in recent years, both in Australia and overseas, and constantly find the discovery of yet another revolting and non-biodegraded nappy a cause for sorrow ... at what we civilised humans are doing to our planet!

Back in the cloth-only days (and in third-world countries where the people could not afford disposables anyway), one could walk out to any beauty spot without fear of looking down the nearest slope and finding one of these ghastly things dangling from a tree. Nowadays, one comes across them too often to feel anything but sickened.

The places which are worst affected are also the least likely to be cleaned up, either by local authorities or the efforts of Clean Up Australia, because they are along roadsides and into any 'remote' area where people go touring with babies. The track up to Cape York Peninsula will remain in my memory marred by this abuse. Whilst I know this is a result of human carelessness, it remains a very sad environmental issue resulting directly from the introduction of the 'disposable' nappy.

My family, who all grew up with CHOICE among the everyday reading in our home, continue to be grateful for the efforts made by the Consumers' Association to inform and improve the things we live with. Keep up the good work!

Penny Marshall
Clontarf, NSW

SHORT SHELF-LIFE

Thanks for providing a great magazine that keeps my family and me well informed about everything: from white ants to fax machines and every product and service in between. It has helped me buy a microwave, a bar fridge, a fax machine, a baby stroller, a fridge, a cordless drill, a hammer drill, an answering machine, a car baby seat and a camera.

I would like to comment, however, that when I want to buy a particular model you recommend, it has often been superseded, particularly in the case of electrical appliances. I usually find the new model just as good, so it's not much of problem. When I once inquired at a store I was told electrical appliances had a 'model shelf life' of 60 to 90 days in Japan. Whether that's true or not I wouldn't know, but it may explain why models change so quickly.

J B
Springwood, NSW

While products in Australia generally have a slightly longer shelf-life than 90 days, some appliances in particular have a fast enough turnover to make it very difficult for us to keep up with their model changes. Electronic and communications products like TVs, videos, audio equipment, mobile phones and computers are the worst offenders — often a model is current for only six months or so. Since a normal CHOICE *test article takes eight or nine months from the beginning of our market research to landing on your doorstep, we've speeded up our testing of products like this recently to keep up with market changes.*

We always check what's on the market and which models will still be available by the time we publish before we decide which models to test, but inevitably there will be new models in the shops only a couple of months after we publish our test report. This is why we report on major appliances at least once a year — to try to keep you as up-to-date as possible with the the new models on the market.

BRIGHT LIGHT

The makers of 'Steal Stopper', an expensive car alarm, have discovered a unique technical means of pressuring their customers. After only three months of driving my new car, a bright red light suddenly appeared on the dashboard and stayed on night and day. It was extremely distracting, especially at night. Obviously it was a warning light and the manual said I should get help from the dealer. What puzzled me was that the alarm still seemed to work perfectly well.

I drove halfway across the city to have it serviced. "Oh, there's nothing wrong with it at all," I was told. "The light is just to remind you to have it checked regularly in case something is wrong. It counts the number of times you set the alarm and then comes on and stays on till you bring it in." You can't turn off this feature. Nor can anyone else, not even your car dealer, even if there is nothing wrong with the alarm. It has to be done with a proprietary hand-held computer!

This technique has lots of possibilities. How about a TV set which counts the number of times you change channels and then flashes a notice constantly while you're viewing: "Call your dealer in. There might be something wrong with this set. Pay them to check it out and they will turn off this message"?

Peter Morton
Adelaide, SA

Steal Stoppers told us the warning light comes on only once, usually after about 10 to 12 months, as a reminder to have the alarm checked while it's still under warranty. When taken to the service dealer, it will be checked free of charge. After that, it says the light won't come on again unless the customer requests it, or if the warranty is extended.

Writing to your insurance company

Insurance contracts traditionally have so much fine print, it's easy to find yourself at cross purposes with your insurance company when you make a claim. Here are some samples of clear, concise letters to help you get your points across.

YOU'VE MADE A CLAIM on your building insurance. You think it's a valid claim for genuine damage, as far as you're aware you've given the insurance company all the information it needs, and you've submitted three quotes — yet the claim has been knocked back. Where do you go from here?

If you've had things properly organised from the start, you may well have obtained initial information by phone about claiming from the company, but you'll have documented every step of the way since then in writing. You'll have kept all relevant documents and quotes and sent copies of them for the company's use. By the time you reach the stage of a dispute, you should have a contact name within the company — though at this stage you'll probably want to take the matter to a higher level. Find out from your contact the name of the department manager or supervisor and take your claim to him or her.

If you can't get any satisfaction from the company — or if it makes you an offer you consider inadequate — you might decide to take the dispute to the insurance Claims Review Panel. This is a complaints review scheme run by the Insurance Council of Australia (ICA) — you'll find the ICA in your phone book.

At any step along the way a clear, concise letter to the insurance company or the Claims Review Panel will help your case. Following are some letters on which you can base your own, adding your own details as appropriate.

The best letters are simple, straightforward and short: grab your reader's attention with the first paragraph — let him or her know exactly what the letter is about. Carefully plan what you want to say and set it out in logical order, grouping your thoughts in paragraphs; don't jump around or digress. Let your reader know that you know your rights and expect them to be respected; if you're not sure, try to get some advice before you write. In the final paragraph, state clearly what you want the reader to do. And be polite, even if you're steaming in reality: offending your reader will achieve nothing (that's one advantage of letter-writing — you can present yourself as calm and reasonable, regardless of your true feelings).

■ Letter informing an insurer of a claim on insurance.

Dear

Re: [*policy number*]

As we discussed on the telephone on [*date*], I wish to make a claim on the above policy.

On [*date*] my property was damaged by [*describe the circumstances*]. As it was an emergency, I called in [*appropriate professional*] who carried out emergency repairs [*describe briefly*]. This work cost [*amount*].

I wish to claim for the emergency work as well as for the eventual cost of repairing the damage properly.

Please send me the appropriate claim form.

Yours sincerely,

PUTTING IT IN WRITING

IF YOU'D LIKE more samples of effective letters for dealing with a range of common situations, you might be interested in the new CHOICE book, *Put it in writing*. It offers '77 letters that get results', covering areas including faulty goods, cars, builders and other tradespeople, professionals, neighbours, government agencies, accidents and injuries, credit and debt and holidays and travel, as well as insurance.

The book also includes background information on your rights and responsibilities in these areas, and gives tips on what to do next if your letters don't get the desired result.

You'll find *Put it in writing* in the Consumer Bookshelf catalogue that arrived with this issue of CHOICE — just use the order form there if you'd like your own copy.

■ Letter rejecting company's denial of liability.

Dear

Re: [*policy number*]

I wish to dispute your rejection of my claim on the grounds that [*state reason why claim was rejected*].

The policy states that [*quote wording*]. The damage to my property was caused by [*cause*] and was not due to [*neglect, etc*] as you suggest. I have enclosed a report from [*relevant expert*] which supports my argument [*details of report*].

I believe that I am covered by the terms of this policy and am entitled to the amount claimed. I would be grateful if you would review your decision to reject my claim and let me have your answer as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

■ Letter rejecting an insurance company's offer.

Dear

Re: [*policy number*]

Thank you for your letter dated [*date*], offering [*amount*] for my [*item*] which was [*detail loss/damage*] on [*date*].

I do not agree, however, with your assessment of the item's value. I have enclosed a valuation certificate made by [*name of valuer*] which states that the [*item*] was worth [*amount*].

Please reconsider your offer in the light of this evidence. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

■ Final letter to an insurance company in a dispute over a claim.

Dear

Re: [*policy number*]

On [*date*] I claimed on this policy for [*describe damage*] which occurred on [*date*].

Although you have reviewed the matter and upheld your original rejection of my claim, I believe that I have supplied sufficient evidence to you in the form of [*describe*] to prove that my claim is covered by the policy.

I believe that I have been unfairly treated and unless you can offer some proposals for settlement within 14 days, I intend to refer my complaint to the Claims Review Panel and/or take legal action.

Yours sincerely,

■ Letter to Claims Review Panel about a dispute with an insurer.

Dear

Re: [*insurance company and policy number*]

I am in dispute with the above insurance company and would like to ask for your assistance in resolving the matter.

I have been unable to reach a settlement with the company in respect of its rejection of my claim. I enclose copies of all relevant correspondence. As I stated therein, I believe that I have been treated unfairly because [*briefly explain reasons*].

I would be very grateful if you would investigate this matter and I look forward to hearing from you in due course.

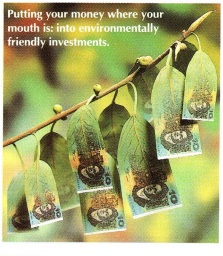
Yours sincerely,

GREEN PAGE

GREEN MONEY

At the same time as you're reusing and recycling those household products, perhaps you could also be rethinking the way you save and invest money.

IT'S CALLED putting your money where your mouth is. 'Green' investments give people the chance to place their spare dollars in investments that are pro-environment or that actively avoid environmentally damaging projects.



Putting your money where your mouth is: into environmentally friendly investments.

There are also 'ethical' funds and co-operatives that are pro any number of other social causes, including community development and co-operative housing. This month the *Green Page* examines those investment products that claim to have an environmental focus.

If you're lucky enough to have some spare cash to put to work, investing in the following funds could mean it's working for the environment (at least in part) at the same time as it's generating profits for you.

■ **ACF GREEN BOND**

The conservative Over 50s Friendly Society takes care of managing the money invested in ACF Green Bonds while the Australian Conservation Foundation finds environmentally worthwhile projects to channel Green Bond money into. This unusual relationship between a member of the 'financial establishment' and the 'greenies' has been maturing since the product was launched in 1991. So far $5 million has been invested in the bonds, but most funds are currently sitting in fixed-interest investments (mainly Commonwealth Government bonds and notes) while the Conservation Foundation looks for worthwhile projects.

Investor inquiries: 008 033 262.

■ **AUGUST INVESTMENTS MANAGED TRUST**

August is an investment product that avoids any investment which it considers to harm the environment unnecessarily. Alistair Clark, the secretary of August's management company, August Financial Management, says the trust has experienced steady growth in recent years. It now has $5.2 million in funds under management.

Investor inquiries: 008 021 227.

■ **YWCA ETHICAL INVESTMENT TRUST**

Managed by mainstream fund manager Global, the YWCA fund has several selection criteria, one of which is the invest-

FAST FOOD: LESS WASTE

RESPONDING to criticism about littering and wasteful packaging, the fast food industry has started to clean up its act. However, the sheer volume of fast food packaging is still a problem.

The bulky and slow-degrading plastic foam burger boxes have been largely replaced by paper and cardboard, which are better in the environmental stakes, though they still have their problems. Both the chemical pulping and bleaching processes involved in paper manufacture create harmful emissions.

For this reason some companies are moving to unbleached paper. Pizza Hut, for instance, uses unbleached cardboard pizza boxes and only a minimum of printing inks. KFC is planning to switch to unbleached cardboard for chip and chicken boxes. McDonald's and Hungry Jack's are using unbleached burger wrap and carrier bags.

Most of the companies' packaging we looked at has been reduced in volume from a few years ago, which is good. KFC is trialling reusable crockery and cutlery for in-house diners, again a welcome move.

The new fast food green image: cardboard and unbleached paper replacing polystyrene and plastic.

Using recycled paper for fast food packaging isn't an option, as health authorities don't recommend using recycled paper for food containers because of the risk of food contamination. Carrier bags from recycled paper are fine, though.

And what about when the food leaves the restaurant? On the 1993 Clean Up Australia Day, judging by a number of samples of clean-up sites, fast food containers accounted for 10% of paper items and 27% of polystyrene waste. Even the paper products can't be recycled because they are contaminated with food remains, so most end up in landfill sites, where they decompose slowly. Perhaps you could try composting them!

For more on fast food — including its role in school sponsorship — see page 7.

ment's environmental impact. Investments may also be chosen based on their ability to create youth employment. There is now over $10 million invested in the YWCA fund, which is about the level of funds an investment trust needs to attract the support of 'mainstream' financial planners.

Investor inquiries: 008 251 589.

■ STOCK WATCH

A new development in the arena of 'green investing' is the growing number of 'green' floats on the stock exchange. Within the past year, there has been a list of floats of environmental significance. Company names to talk about with your stockbroker include: Hydromet, Pacific Hydro, Simsmetal, Energy Development, Shared Investments, Mineral Controlled Instruments, Enviro Recovery Services, River House and Metal Corp.

Pick a worthy cause

The environment is not the only 'cause' championed by the ethical investment community. If you're concerned about community-based development or co-operative housing, for instance, the following organisations may also be worth contacting:

■ ACT Local Investment Fund Limited (ACTLIF): (06) 242 1988.

■ ANA Housing Co-operative (also has an ethical superannuation product): (07) 260 5075.

■ Fitzroy and Carlton Community Credit Co-operative: (03) 419 4533. Limited membership open to people over 15 years old who:

– Live or work in Fitzroy, Carlton, Collingwood, Clifton Hill or Northcote, or

– Are members of Action and Resources Centre co-op in Clifton Hill, or

– Are community groups or employees of one within the postcode 3000.

■ Macaulay Community Credit Co-operative: (03) 372 1718.

■ Maleny and District Community Credit Union: (074) 94 2144.

They came, they saw...

While some ethical investment funds have been enjoying steady growth, others have not been so fortunate.

■ Friends Provident Life was recently taken over by Tower Life. The future of Friends' ethical superannuation bonds, insurance bonds and growth trust is uncertain.

■ Bellingen District Loan Fund: absorbed into the Banana Coast Credit Union. No longer has an ethical focus.

■ The North Coast Ethical Credit Union: absorbed by the Summerland Credit Union (Lismore) — no longer has an ethical focus. ❑

The 12th CHOICE Subscriber Draw

For new subscriptions and renewals received April 1 to June 30, 1994

Subscriber draws are now held quarterly and on July 1 we'll be holding our twelfth. The lucky winner will be able to choose any two products from the following tests, published October 1993 to December 1993.

- ☐ Vacuum cleaners (October 1993)
- ☐ Multi-function electric wall ovens (October 1993 — sorry, the Simpson and Westinghouse models are not available.)
- ☐ Petrol lawnmowers (November 1993)
- ☐ Telephones (November 1993)
- ☐ Video game systems (December 1993)
- ☐ Small drinks coolers (December 1993)

These are products we bought for testing, so you won't be the first to turn them on or set them up. But we'll cover any service problems with a CHOICE warranty that'll match the manufacturers' — just as if you'd bought them new.

All new CHOICE subscriptions and renewals received from members and personal subscribers (including donors of gift subscriptions) by June 30 will go into the draw, unless of course you indicate you don't want to be included.

(If you're not due to renew your subscription during the period, don't worry, we'll be holding other draws during the year — your renewal notice will have the details. And if you're on a two-year subscription you'll be entered on your first anniversary as well as when you renew again.)

Our tenth winner

Alma Webber was a little surprised when she took delivery of the **SAMSUNG** refrigerator and **JANOME** sewing machine she'd recently won in our tenth subscriber draw. "Initially, I thought I'd just won the fridge, which I was thrilled about, but then I got the letter saying 'your prizes' and thought, 'they must be sending me both'." Now she's twice as thrilled and gets to replace her 20-year-old fridge and 30-year-old sewing machine in one go.

The fridge has already been fully stocked with food but the sewing machine has yet to be pressed into service. However, with the recent addition to the family of a beautiful granddaughter, Alma is looking forward to honing her rather rusty dressmaking skills by running up a few stylish baby outfits.

Alma has been a CHOICE subscriber for more years than she cares to remember, and keeps subscribing because she always finds it a "good read" from cover to cover and full of useful information. She and her family always check out CHOICE when they want to purchase a product, and neighbours also use her copies when they're planning a purchase — it's a community service!

✍ Use the order form overleaf ☞

CONDITIONS OF ENTRY

1. The winner will be drawn from new subscriptions and renewals from personal subscribers (including members and donors of gift subscriptions) received April 1 to June 30, 1994. If you opt for a two-year subscription, you'll be entered on your first anniversary as well as when you actually renew or subscribe.
2. Information on how to enter and prizes forms part of these conditions of entry.
3. Employees, and their immediate families, of the Australian Consumers' Association and its associated companies and agencies are ineligible to enter.
4. Entrants must be residents of Australia.
5. Applications are subject to a verification check and the judge's decision is final. No correspondence will be entered into.
6. The prizes will be delivered free anywhere within Australia.
7. Prizes cannot be taken as cash.
8. South Australian residents may enter the draw by completing the form and posting to: Reply Paid No. 24, ACA, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, without subscribing to the magazine. Only one entry per person is permissible through this method.
9. Last date for receipt of entries to the draw is June 30, 1994. No responsibility accepted for lost, late or misdirected mail.
10. The draw will be conducted at the office of the Consumers' Association at 10 am on July 1, 1994.
11. The winner will be notified by letter and published in the September 1994 issue of CHOICE magazine.
12. The promoter is Australian Consumers' Association, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204. NSW Permit No. TC94/0830, Vic Permit No. 94/578 issued on 28/2/94, ACT Permit No. TP94/0381 issued under the Lotteries Ordinance, NT No. NT94/0285.

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Straight to the point

To help you get the right person as quick as possible CHOICE has upgraded its te phone system. So here are two importa numbers that will get you directly to t service you need:

Consumer Information Service:
(02) 559 98

For free help with a consumer problem, an update on past product tests.

Subscription Service: **(02) 558 80**

For enquiries about subscription or to orc books from our Consumer Bookshelf.

Consumer Rights Advice

CHOICE operates consumer rights lines people having problems with a faulty pr duct or a dispute with a service person. T lines set out what your basic rights are a what steps you can take to protect the These lines are also available in four la guages other than English — Vietname Arabic, Chinese and Turkish.

CHOICE Consumer Rights Advice:
0055 200
Advice in Vietnamese: **0055 200**
Advice in Turkish: **0055 200**
Advice in Chinese: **0055 200**
Advice in Arabic: **0055 200**

Youth lines

A line specifically for young consumers, t 'Ripped-off' Line, outlines your shoppi rights as well as letting you know what y can do if you run into problems with som thing you have bought.

Students can also call a resource line find out where to get up-to-date informati on the consumer movement and the env ronment. These two topics are the mo requested by students and teachers who ri our Consumer Information Service.

CHOICE 'Ripped-off' Line — Advice for Young Consumers: **0055 200**
CHOICE Student Resource Guide:
0055 200

Product advice

A number of product lines also summari what to look for when you are buying particular product. Brand-name recomme dations aren't included, however — the remain exclusive to CHOICE subscribers.

CHOICE Washing Machine Advice:
0055 200
CHOICE Water Filter Advice: **0055 200**
CHOICE Baby Products Advice:
0055 200
CHOICE Safer Domestic Pest Control Advice: **0055 200**

Calls attract a rate of 55 cents per minut

Microwaving

Your questions answered

Microwaving is popular, time and energy-efficient and safe — but you have to observe a few basic rules and change some of your traditional cooking practices.

DOMESTIC MICROWAVE OVENS have been available in Australia for more than two decades now. For a generation they have become an integral part of the kitchen. After the USA and Japan, Australia comes third in the ownership league with about 70–80% of households owning a microwave oven. But despite — or is it because of? — their popularity, we're still asked a lot of questions about microwaving, its effects on food and especially its safety. Your most common queries are answered below; for more cooking hints it's probably best to attend special microwave cooking classes or consult specialised cookbooks.

Effects on food

■ How does microwaving affect the nutrient value of food compared with other methods of cooking?

Most food cooked in a microwave oven is at least as nutritious as food cooked in a conventional oven or on the stovetop. Fresh fruit and vegetables in particular retain more of their water-soluble and heat-affected vitamins, as microwave cooking generally requires little water or fat, if any, and takes less time. A recent study of 14 microwaved vegetables showed they retained 80% to 85% of their Vitamin C and vitamins of the B group — the same retention rate as steamed vegetables.

■ Is a microwave oven suitable for warming infant milk?

Because of the risk of scalding due to uneven heating it's best not to warm expressed breast milk or infant formula in a microwave oven. The bottle may feel cool but the milk could be hot inside. Dr Neil Campbell, director of the Neonatology Unit at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne, is also concerned about warming breast milk as it can easily coagulate (curdle) at too high temperatures in a microwave oven, which can result in loss of quality and nutritional value. If you have to warm infant formula in a microwave oven — say in a restaurant — shake the bottle thoroughly before you test how hot it is. Or leave it cold, as it's only warmed for comfort, not necessity, says Dr Howard Chilton, director of the Newborn Medical Centre at the Royal Hospital for Women in Sydney.

■ How do I make sure microwaved food is cooked or hot enough?

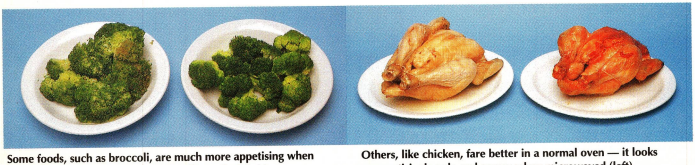
Microwave energy cooks the food from the outside to the centre. It can only penetrate 2 to 4 cm into the food, but the heat generated there is conducted to the centre. To achieve even cooking results it's a good idea to divide food into individual portions, and to stir or turn it frequently. As a general rule:

– Uniformly shaped food cooks more evenly than irregular shapes.
– Foods high in sugar cook faster than low-sugar foods.
– Foods high in fat cook faster than low-fat foods.
– Porous foods cook faster than dense foods.
– Foods high in salt take longer to heat than low-salt foods.
– For larger meals, cooking at a lower power setting for a longer period may be more effective than for a short time on high, as the outside may burn before the inside is cooked.

■ Does microwaving influence the taste or appearance of food?

Depending on what you cook in a microwave oven, it can either taste just as good, better or worse than if cooked conventionally. Microwaving is great for fresh vegetables, fruits, fish and lean meats as you need less water, which can dilute the natural flavour. Shorter cooking times also help retain flavour.

On the other hand, some food fails to develop its appetising brown crust and nutty flavour. According to scientists in the US, much of the flavour of conventionally cooked food is due to the the Maillard reaction — a complex series of reactions between sugars and proteins which causes caramelisation, or browning, as on a crusty loaf of bread or roast meat. In a microwave oven food is often cooked for periods too short or at tem-



Some foods, such as broccoli, are much more appetising when microwaved (right) than conventionally cooked (left).

Others, like chicken, fare better in a normal oven — it looks unappetisingly pale and greasy when microwaved (left).

peratures too low to bring about the Maillard reaction.

Foods that require browning — such as roasts, cakes, pies, bread and pastries — are best cooked in a conventional oven or a combined microwave/convection oven with additional hot air circulation. However, to produce the familiar look and taste of roasted food in a microwave oven, you can use special browning dishes or try basting food with seasonings containing natural food colours.

■ **Can food poisoning bacteria survive microwaving?**

Microwaves don't kill bacteria but heat does. At least 70°C has to be maintained for several minutes to kill most food poisoning bacteria. This might not be reached overall when heating large portions, which is why it's better to heat individual serves, particularly if they can't be stirred.

As bacteria may survive in cool spots, it's very important to observe the standing time, as listed in the recipe, because the food still cooks — or keeps heating through — when the oven is switched off. This is particularly important when you're cooking larger pieces of food. Some studies found a whole chicken, cooked in 38 minutes in the microwave oven, needed a further 20 minutes' standing time for the stuffing to reach more than 70°C.

Technology

■ **How does microwave technology work?**

A microwave is a short radio wave that travels in a straight line at the speed of light. It's of the non-ionising type, so it doesn't alter the atomic structure of the matter it passes through — unlike X-rays, ultraviolet rays or nuclear radiation — and has nothing to do with radioactivity. But you still wouldn't want to be exposed to too much — after all, it does cook things!

The active part of the oven is called a magnetron — it's a vacuum tube which produces microwaves by converting electrical into microwave energy. This passes along a metal guide path into the oven cavity. The metal or epoxy-coated interior oven walls stay cool during cooking as they reflect the microwaves in all directions.

Although microwaves reflect off metal, they pass through non-metallic materials and cook only the food; glass, plastic and ceramic containers get hot only because the heat from the food passes into them. It's not usually recommended you use aluminium or other metal containers because the microwaves won't pass through them into the food, and you run the risk of causing arcing (sparks) inside the oven (see *Food containers and packaging*, right, for more information).

Food absorbs the microwaves, which causes its water molecules to vibrate, producing friction and so heat. The waves, converted into heat, cannot make the food or the oven radioactive.

Safety

■ **Do microwave ovens stay safe, and how can you check?**

All microwave ovens sold in Australia are subject to stringent safety standards, one of which prescribes that leakage may not exceed 5 mW/cm^2 at a distance of 5 cm from the outside of the oven. The microwave ovens we've tested in the past have all been well within the Standard.

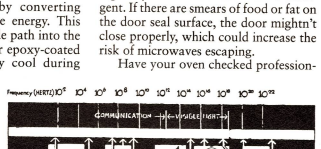
When the oven door is opened, the production of microwaves automatically cuts out. However, the possibility of leakage can't be ruled out if an oven is damaged or the door is out of alignment. In such cases, don't use it and don't try to fix the problem yourself. Have it checked by the manufacturer or an approved service agent. (WA is so far the only state where microwave oven service personnel are required to hold a special licence, but such a requirement may be introduced in other states.)

Commercial microwave ovens should be tested every three years. Domestic ones should remain leak-free if you regularly check them for damage and keep them clean. Make sure you wipe the oven cavity, door and seals regularly with water and a mild detergent. If there are smears of food or fat on the door seal surface, the door mightn't close properly, which could increase the risk of microwaves escaping.

Have your oven checked professionally if you discover any damage such as burn marks on the door seal, rust on the door grille or in the oven cavity, or if a leakage detector indicates a leak.

If you have any queries about the radiation safety of your microwave oven, contact the manufacturer, the Australian Radiation Laboratory on (03) 433 2211 or the relevant government authority in your state:

ACT: David Smoker, Director of Radiation Safety, (06) 247 2899.
NSW: Environmental Protection Authority, (02) 795 5013.
NT: Brad Cassels, Radiation Health Branch, (089) 89 2983.
Queensland: Radiation Health, Queensland Health Department, (07) 252 5446.
SA: Radiation Protection Branch, SA Health Department, (08) 226 6520.
Tasmania: Health Physics Section, Department of Community and Health Services, (002) 33 6421.
Victoria: Contact the manufacturer.
WA: Contact the health surveyor at your local council or the Radiation Health Section, (09) 346 2260.



Where microwaves 'sit' along the frequency band — a long way from damaging radiation such as UV, x-rays or nuclear wavelengths.

SCALDING RISKS

■ Always open covered or packaged food away from your face as escaping steam can cause serious burns.

■ Beware of hot spots in food of mixed textures. For example, the outside of a jam tart or doughnut may just be lukewarm, but the jam inside could be so hot as to burn your mouth, as sugar heats very quickly; it can even catch fire.

■ To avoid the risk of fire, watch the food you cook in a microwave oven. Should it overheat and catch fire, turn the oven off, leave the door closed and let the fire go out by itself. Of the 30 fires caused by microwave ovens last year, the most damage was caused when people opened the door and tried to extinguish the fire. Your hands and clothes can get burnt and the fire can spread to surrounding furnishings.

Also leave sufficient air space around the oven's ventilation slots and store easily combustible materials, such as cookbooks, away from the microwave oven.

Energy

■ **What difference does wattage make?**

The wattage rating of a microwave oven has a bearing on how long it takes to heat or cook food. Food will cook faster on 'high' in a higher-wattage oven — which is particularly useful for heating drinks. On the other hand, food is also more

likely to be overcooked or dried out. There is currently a proposal before the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) to limit the power output of domestic models to 1 kW. Most microwave ovens sold in Australia have a power output of 600 to 850 W, though higher-wattage models are available. Australia has its own Standard, but is considering adopting the system specified by the IEC and used in Europe.

Various testing methods are used internationally to measure the power output rating of microwave ovens. These tests give slightly different ratings, which might affect recipes written for ovens rated according to a different method. If you're unsure whether the rating matches the recipe, set the timer for less time than the recipe states and check the food as it cooks.

■ **Why does it take longer to cook food when microwave ovens get older?**

As with light bulbs or television picture tubes, the power output of a microwave oven can decrease when it gets older. Contrary to some consumers' observations, manufacturers claim it's an insignificant drop in power and hardly noticeable. They say it'll probably take only a few seconds longer to heat a cup of coffee.

■ **How energy-efficient are microwave ovens?**

Microwave ovens are generally very energy-efficient. The power used to run one is roughly equivalent to that used by an electric jug or frypan. For small quantities or single serves, microwave cooking is certainly more energy-efficient than conventional methods. The larger the portion, however, the longer the cooking process takes.

Microwave cooking also wastes less energy than conventional methods. The oven doesn't need preheating; much more energy is absorbed by the food and therefore not wasted; and much less extra load is placed on nearby fridges or freezers as little heat escapes from the oven.

Food containers and packaging

■ **What plastic containers can I use in a microwave oven?**

Only use plastic containers specifically labelled as microwave-safe, as other plastics could get overheated and present problems. While we generally encourage practising the three Rs (reduce, reuse, recycle) with regard to packaging, it's best to leave margarine, butter, ice cream and take-away food plastic containers for their intended purpose.

Most ice cream and take-away food containers are made from polypropylene, which is heat-resistant to 135°C. They'd probably be all right for heating water or quick warming of low-fat and low-sugar foods. Most margarine or butter containers are made from ABS (acrylonitrile butadiene styrene copolymer), which has a much lower heat resistance. While all these plastics are safe for use as intended, they may not withstand the high temperatures that high-fat or high-sugar foods (such as gravies, casseroles, lasagne, jams or fruit sauces) can reach when cooked in a microwave oven. The hot food could overheat unsuitable plastic containers, could discolour them or cause them to melt and deform — and some of the plastic's components could migrate into your food.

When heating precooked or convenience food sold in microwave-safe containers, follow the manufacturer's instructions.

■ **Will packaging materials migrate into the food?**

Microwave-absorbing **heat 'susceptors'** induce high temperatures and help cook, brown and crisp food such as popcorn, pastry products and pizza. They can reach temperatures above 260°C. **Dual-ovenable plastic trays** (for conventional or microwave ovens) usually reach 170 to 210°C. A few years ago the safety of both these kinds of packaging for microwave convenience food was questioned. Since then, the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, which is part of the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), has conducted extensive studies. It found that only relatively small amounts of packaging components might migrate into food from heat susceptors, and even smaller amounts from dual-ovenable packaging. The Center is currently evaluating whether these levels are safe for humans. It has advised that until its review is completed, people shouldn't regard these products as a health hazard.

■ **Are aluminium foil and foil containers safe for use in a microwave oven?**

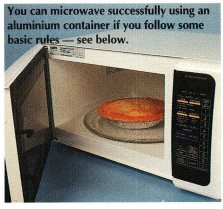
Metal dishes and foils are generally unsuitable as microwaves bounce off the metal and won't warm the food. There's also the danger of arcing (sparks or a static discharge which can damage the oven's interior) if the metal container touches or gets too close to the oven's walls. However, according to the Microwave Information Council of Australia (MICA), aluminium foil and foil containers — *if used correctly* — will not harm the microwave oven magnetron or the service life of the oven.

– Make sure the container doesn't touch any metal part of the oven, such as the side panels.

– Remove the foil-lined lid so the microwaves can enter the food from the top. Replace it with microwave-safe plastic wrap, if desired.

– The container should be no deeper than 5 cm and should be at least two thirds full of food.

– As aluminium foil reflects microwaves, it can be used to shield parts of food that would otherwise overcook, such as thinner parts of a roast or wings and legs of poultry, or bits that shouldn't thaw, if you're defrosting. Again, make sure no part of the foil touches the inside of the oven.



You can microwave successfully using an aluminium container if you follow some basic rules — see below.

■ **What other cookware can I use in a microwave oven?**

Heatproof glass cookware is perfect for use in microwave ovens, but be careful with glass containers not specifically labelled as microwave-safe. Never use narrow-necked jars or glasses as they could explode if the liquid gets too hot. Crystal ware should not be used as it may contain lead.

China, pottery, earthenware and ceramic containers are suitable as long as they are non-porous and have no metal trim. Paper plates can be used for dry foods.

■ **How can I check whether a container is suitable?**

Place the clean, dry container you want to check on the turntable inside the microwave oven. Three-quarters fill a small microwave-safe bowl with cold water and put it in the container you're testing. Heat on high for 1 to $1\frac{1}{2}$ minutes. Test the temperature of the water, bowl and container.

If the water is hot, the bowl is warm and the outer edges of the container are cold, the container is safe for microwave use.

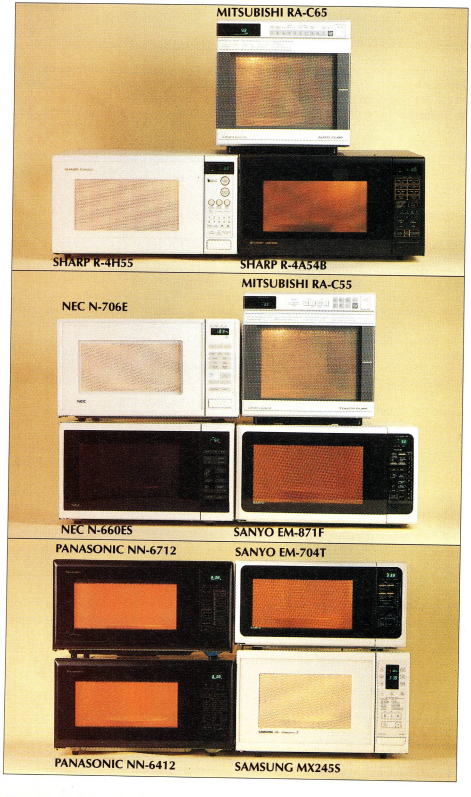
If the container is hot, some microwave energy has been absorbed, making it unsuitable.

If any arcing occurs, stop the oven immediately and remove the container. It is unsafe for microwave use.

Specially designed browning dishes may not comply with all these requirements, but are still safe for microwave use if so labelled. ❑

MEDIUM MICROWAVE OVENS

Most microwaves can be expected to cook, defrost and reheat quite well, but how easy are they to use and how efficient are their automatic programs?



"NEXT SUMMER when I go camping, I'm going to find a camping ground with powered tent sites so I can take my microwave oven," remarked a CHOICE subscriber recently. "It beats waiting for the billy to boil when the baby is crying for a bottle at 5 am."

Microwave ovens are obviously an accepted part of our modern lifestyle. Market research shows that compact (just right for camping) and medium-size models have by far the biggest market shares. Research also indicates that, although we're buying microwaves with an increasing array of automatic features, we still tend to use them as 'billy substitutes' — mostly for reheating, defrosting and basic cooking.

How did the medium-size microwaves in this test manage the basics — defrosting, reheating and cooking? What other differences did we find between the models?

THE BASICS: HARDLY A CHALLENGE

We cooked whole chickens and buttercakes in the ovens to assess their cooking ability using normal cycles.

NOT TESTED

The **CHEF MX135** wasn't included in this test because it has rotary dials; all the models tested have electronic controls.

- The **SAMSUNG MX2455** tested is the same as the **SAMSUNG MX245** except that the former has a sensor.
- The following models were not tested because they were being superseded: **NEC N658E, AKAI MW400.** The **SANYO EM704TW**, which is to replace the **SANYO EM704T** tested, is only cosmetically different.
- The following brands were outside our purchasing criteria because they were priced above $500: **AEG, MIELE, WHIRLPOOL.**
- New brands/models which were released too late to be included in this test were: **KAMBROOK, GAGGENAU, AKAI MW402, BOSCH, PALSONIC, PANASONIC NN-6453** and **NN-6753, NEC N668E, SANYO EMV758** and **EMV860.**

■ **Chicken:** All the ovens produced a good result cooking a chicken: all were able to cook it to a safe temperature of 70°C or over throughout (most food poisoning bacteria are killed in five minutes at 70°C).

The best: The two NEC models.

The worst: The **PANASONIC NN-6412** and the **SAMSUNG**.

■ **Buttercake:** Most ovens cooked this well.

The best: The **SHARP R-4A54B, SANYO EM-871F** and the two **MITSUBISHIs**.

The worst: The **SAMSUNG** produced a dry cake; in both **PANASONICs** and the **SANYO EM-704T** the cake didn't rise evenly, the top of each partially sinking.

■ **Reheating** is still one of the most common uses for microwave ovens. All these models were able to reheat an individual portion of lasagne to 70°C, the lasagne varying from 'hot' to 'very hot' when eaten.

The best: The **SHARP R-4H55** and **SANYO EM-704T**.

The worst: The lasagne reheated in the **MITSUBISHI RA-C55, NEC N-706E** and the **SAMSUNG** was the most dried-out along the edges.

■ **Defrosting mince:** All the models defrosted a chunk of mince successfully using the defrost setting for the recommended time, though the results varied from just 'fair' to 'very good'. While you can put the mince back in for extra time if it's not fully defrosted at the end of the cycle, an oven that went too far and warmed or browned the mince was marked down.

The best: The **SHARP R-4A54B** and **PANASONIC NN-6712**.

The worst: Both **SANYO** models warmed or partially cooked around 10% of the mince.

New design

Some manufacturers are 'daring to be different' in the way they design their microwaves. For instance, the two **MITSUBISHI** models stand out because of their different shape. They're both narrower and taller than the others, with control panels across the top rather than down the right-hand side. One advantage of their shape would be the saving of space on a benchtop, though it could be a disadvantage to people wanting to put the oven in a high position where the controls might be difficult to reach.

Turntable off

The **SANYO EM-871F** had an unusual feature in that the turntable could be turned off. This may be recommended when cooking large items like roast turkey or other foods that are likely to touch the oven walls or have trouble turning on the rotating turntable.

We measured microwave distribution in this model with the turntable off and found it to be poor. If you were cooking a turkey, for example, these results indicate that it might be unevenly cooked. Interrupting the cooking process and turning the dish may produce better results.

Ease of use

To be easy to use, a microwave oven should have logical controls and programs, with an explanatory and easy-to-read display. You should be able to know at a glance what the oven is doing without having to interpret confusing symbols or line up bars on the display against words on the panel. There should be good access through the door opening and good visibility through the door.

■ **Display/programming:** Generally speaking, none was difficult to use, though there were differences.

The best: The **MITSUBISHI RA-C65**.

The worst: Best avoided by those who find programming a microwave something of a daunting task — the **NEC N-660ES**, both **PANASONICs** and both **SANYOs**. Some of the control pads on the **SANYOs** weren't clearly defined.

■ **Visibility through the door:** In both the **NEC N-660ES** and the **SHARP R-4H55** it was difficult to see the food in the oven.

■ **Access through the door:** The other-

AUTO FUNCTIONS

NEW MODELS of microwave oven are appearing on the market with an ever-increasing range of automatic programming features. How well did the auto functions perform in this test?

■ **Cooking broccoli** was tested in the microwave ovens using auto function controls. The **NEC N-660ES** and both **SHARP** models produced the best results.

The ovens that don't have an auto function for cooking broccoli (or other similar vegetables), and therefore weren't included in this test, were the **MITSUBISHI RA-C65, MITSUBISHI RA-C55, NEC N-706E** and **PANASONIC NN-6412**.

■ Some microwaves have instructions for cooking **beef** as one of a range of automatic cooking functions. In the five microwaves offering this option only the **SHARP R-4H55** was able to cook it consistently throughout. All the others had problems with varying degrees of evenness of cooking. Where auto cook for beef wasn't provided, **chicken or fish** was cooked according to the oven's individual auto program. Most ovens were able to cook the selected food evenly and to the right texture.

Some ovens don't have an automatic cooking program at all: **MITSUBISHI RA-C55, NEC N-706E, PANASONIC NN-6412** — they were excluded from this test.

■ A **plated 'typical' meal** consisting of slices of roast beef, boiled potatoes, carrot strips and green peas plus gravy was used to test the ovens' auto reheat function. Most ovens produced good results. None had problems heating the meal to the appropriate temperature but they all had some degree of trouble with slight drying out on the edges.

Models which weren't included in this test because they don't have the auto reheat function were: **MITSUBISHI RA-C55, NEC N-706E, SHARP R-4A54B**.

■ A whole **frozen chicken** was defrosted using the ovens' auto function. In all microwaves the chickens were warmed/cooked to various degrees when being defrosted, all but one scoring 'fair' to 'good' results. The **SAMSUNG** received a 'poor' score, with a significant amount of ice remaining in the cavity and the limbs still frozen.

Auto cooking scores

Brand/model (in overall rank order)	Auto cook broccoli	Auto cook beef/ chicken/fish	Auto reheat plated meal	Auto defrost chicken
SHARP R-4H55	95	90	70	70
SHARP R-4A54B	95	80	not applicable	70
MITSUBISHI RA-C65	not applicable	60	60	60
NEC N-706E	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	70
MITSUBISHI RA-C55	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable	60
NEC N-660ES	95	40	80	40
SANYO EM-871F	60	90	70	80
PANASONIC NN-6712	60	80	80	50
SANYO EM-704T	50	80	40	70
PANASONIC NN-6412	not applicable	not applicable	40	50
SAMSUNG MX245S	80	50	70	30

Microwave ovens

	Brand/model (in rank order)	Manufacturer/ distributor	Origin	Target price ($)*	Warranty (years)	1 Power output (stated/measured: IEC)	Dimensions (W x H x D cm)	2 Usable volume (litres)	3 Auto cook**	3 Au reh
	SHARP R-4H55	Sharp	Thailand	400	1	900 / 970	55 x 31 x 42	24	✓	✓
	SHARP R-4A54B	Sharp	Thailand	370	1	900 / 975	55 x 31 x 42	24	✓	
	MITSUBISHI RA-C65	Mitsubishi Electric	Taiwan	400	1	780 / 790	40 x 40 x 42	19	✓	✓
	NEC N-706E	NEC	Korea	350	1	850 / 905	56 x 32 x 43	23		
equal	**MITSUBISHI** RA-C55	Mitsubishi Electric	Taiwan	350	1	780 / 780	40 x 40 x 42	19	✓	✓
	NEC N-660ES	NEC	Korea	350	1	850 / 880	54 x 31 x 39	19	✓	✓
	SANYO EM-871F	Sanyo	Singapore	380	1	900 / 960	55 x 31 x 45	18	✓	✓
equal	**PANASONIC** NN-6712	Panasonic	Japan	420	1 *(A)*	850 / 965	55 x 31 x 43	21	✓	✓
	SANYO EM-704T	Sanyo	Singapore	290	1	800 / 845	53 x 28 x 42	18	✓	✓
	PANASONIC NN-6412	Panasonic	Japan	370	1 *(A)*	850 / 970	55 x 31 x 43	21		✓
	SAMSUNG MX245S	Samsung	Korea	300	2	900 / 960	53 x 34 x 40	19	✓	✓

* Prices shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on nationwide checks in January 1994. Anything lower is a bargain.

** All the ovens have an auto defrost program.
(A) Panasonic has an optional extra year of warranty for $20.

wise good **MITSUBISHI RA-C65** was the worst for access, with limited space for your hands when trying to place large dishes in the oven.

■ **Ease of cleaning:** We found no major differences between the models.

■ **Instructions:** Operating instructions should cover use, safety, cleaning and troubleshooting, with good diagrams.

The best: The two **SHARP** models.

The worst: The two **PANASONICs** and the **SAMSUNG.**

■ **Cookbooks:** These should contain a large range of recipes to help the novice microwave user; handy microwave cooking hints are also useful.

The best: The cookbooks with the two **SHARP** models.

The worst: The NEC and **SAMSUNG** books.

Any problems?

The only oven to develop a problem during use was the **SAMSUNG**: the top right-hand corner of the door would stick and prevent the door from opening when the release button was pressed. This tended to happen when the door hadn't been opened for some time. Successive pressing of the release button would eventually open the door. It's hard to say whether this was a design or sample fault.

You won't do it very often, but when the light globe in a microwave blows, changing it should be a simple procedure. Most models in this test would require a service call if a light globe blew. The **SHARPs** were the only models with an easy-to-remove external flap to allow the owner to change the globe.

Conclusions

Overall, the microwave ovens in this test handled the basic cooking, reheating and defrosting tests reasonably well. Most models also scored 'good' to 'very good' in the automatic cooking and reheating tests — see *Auto cooking scores* on page 43. The **SAMSUNG's** overall score, however, was brought down by its comparatively poor cooking results.

WHAT TO BUY

SHARP R-4H55	$400
SHARP R-4A54B	$370
MITSUBISHI RA-C65	$400

Prices shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on nationwide checks in January 1994.

FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

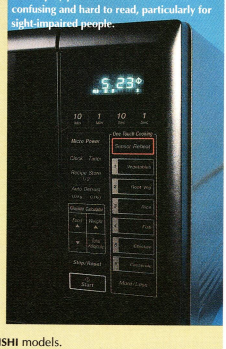
A MAJOR CONSIDERATION for disabled people when buying a new microwave oven is the physical layout of the display pad. Buttons should be easy to read and press, ideally with some tactile feedback for the sight-impaired. Most models rated poorly in this area, with small, hard to read labelling and displays. The best displays were on the **MITSUBISHI RA-C65** and the **SAMSUNG.** The worst models for the sight-impaired were the **NEC N-660ES** and both **PANASONICs**, which had confusing as well as hard to read labelling and displays.

Most ovens have door release buttons that are large and easily operated. Models which would be less suitable for people with limited dexterity would be both **MITSUBISHIs** and both **PANASONICs**. People with limited dexterity should also avoid the two **SANYO** and **SHARP** models as their time pads are very close together, making it difficult to set the required time.

Depending on bench height, people in wheelchairs may find it difficult to reach the control panel of the two **MITSUBISHI** models.

Automatic cooking and reheating features are useful, particularly for people receiving meals on wheels.

Overall, even considering the negative comments on some aspects of the **MITSUBISHI RA-C65** and the **SAMSUNG**, they were considered the most suitable models for the majority of disabled people.



The display panel on the Panasonics is confusing and hard to read, particularly for sight-impaired people.

4 Memory programming	5 Multi-stage programming	6 Auto start	7 Keep warm/hold	8 Ease of use score (%)	9 Cooking score (%)	10 Overall score (%)	Brand/model (in rank order)	
	✓	✓		76	82	81	**SHARP** R-4H55	
	✓	✓		76	81	79	**SHARP** R-4A54B	
	✓	✓		83	76	78	**MITSUBISHI** RA-C65	
✓	✓	✓	✓	72	75	74	**NEC** N-706E	
	✓			71	74	73	**MITSUBISHI** RA-C55	equal
	✓	✓	✓	66	76	73	**NEC** N-660ES	
	✓	✓	✓	69	72	71	**SANYO** EM-871F	
✓		✓		64	73	70	**PANASONIC** NN-6712	equal
	✓	✓	✓	69	70	70	**SANYO** EM-704T	
✓		✓		64	69	67	**PANASONIC** NN-6412	
✓	✓			78	58	64	**SAMSUNG** MX245S	

1 Power output
All models gave power output information according to the IEC (International Electrotechnical Commission) method of calculation. Others also gave power output calculated according to the relevant Australian Standard. We've given IEC figures because we expect the Australian standard to incorporate IEC test methods for power output in the near future. The measured power output of some ovens varied considerably from the stated output, which could affect the cooking times of recipes.

2 Usable volume
The usable volume of a microwave oven will always be less than the volume stated by the manufacturer, which includes *all* internal space — some of which, due to the turntable and protrusions from the walls of some ovens, is not actually usable. The usable volume is only the maximum space in which a cylinder can rotate without hitting the walls of the oven.

3 Standard auto features
All the ovens had an auto defrost feature. Most also had automatic cook and automatic reheat functions, which will automatically turn off when the particular food is cooked or reheated to an appropriate temperature. For information about the performance of these features, see *Auto functions* on page 43. The programs provided were either auto weight, a preprogrammed function or a sensor-cooking function.

4 Memory programming
This feature enables you to enter your own programs into a memory. So if you're likely to cook a certain recipe regularly and the process takes several cooking stages which would have to be set independently, you can program each step into the memory. It can then simply be recalled as a program.

5 Multi-stage programming
This type of programming enables you to set the controls for several stages (two or three) of meal preparation, which the oven then performs automatically. In other words, all at once you can program the oven to defrost a piece of meat, cook it on high for a nominated time and then cook it on low. You don't have to return to the oven to program it for each cooking step.

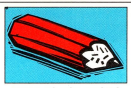
6 Auto start
This feature enables you to set the oven to start automatically at a nominated time, perhaps while you're out or busy in another part of the house.

7 Keep warm/hold
When ovens with this feature have completed cooking a particular food, they will then operate at very low power to keep the food warm or hold it at a certain temperature.

8 Ease of use score
The ease of use score was based on an assessment of each microwave's controls and displays, ease of cleaning and the quality of instructions and cookbooks supplied.

9 Cooking score
The cooking score is based on how well each oven performed at cooking a whole chicken and a buttercake using normal (not automatic) cooking cycles. The scores for defrosting chicken and mince and reheating lasagne are also included because they are the programs common to all models tested.

10 Overall score
The overall score was a combination of ease of use and cooking performance, weighted as follows:
- Ease of use: 30%
- Cooking: 70%



WHAT DO YOU KNOW?

1 Modern IBM-compatible computers are often referred to as 386 or 486-type machines. What does this number refer to?
A) The speed at which the computer can run.
B) The size of the hard disk.
C) The type of microprocessor chip the machine is based on.

2 If you pay for goods with a cheque and then find out they are faulty, you are legally entitled to cancel the cheque to stop payment until you settle the matter with the seller.
True or false?

3 If you make a bid at an auction, you are entitled to withdraw the bid so long the hammer hasn't fallen.
True or false?

4 If you lose your credit card, you are liable for any fraudulent transactions made until the time you report the card missing.
True or false?

5 Which type of tobacco is banned in Australia?
A) Dry leaf tobacco.
B) Oral (smokeless) tobacco.
C) Cigars (but only in restaurants).

6 Where would you most likely find a Porro prism?
A) In a microwave oven.
B) In a pair of binoculars.
C) In a television set.
D) In a waterproof camera.

7 The surrealist poet Leon-Paul Fargue is believed to have bestowed the title *les pieds de Dieu* — the feet of God — on which type of cheese?
A) Blue vein.
B) Camembert.
C) Parmesan.
D) Gorgonzola.

8 The antibiotics left over in your bathroom cabinet from the last time you were ill could now be poisonous.
True or false?

9 From the end of this year, what innovation will apply to all new fridges sold in Australia?
A) They must all have an energy rating label of four stars or better.
B) They must be temperature-controlled never to go above 4°C.
C) No chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) will have been used to make them.
D) They will all include automatic ice cube makers.

10 Cellulase is:
A) A form of starch.
B) A surgical process for removing subcutaneous fat, using laser beams
C) An enzyme used in laundry detergent.
D) A brand of mobile phone.

11 What is an equity trust?
A) An investor who believes in justice and fair play.
B) An investment in a horse stud.
C) A collective fund which invests in the stockmarket.
D) A collective fund which invests only in environmentally sound property development.

12 An insurance company may refuse to pay your car insurance claim if you haven't disclosed your previous:
A) On-the-spot fines for speeding.
B) Fines for overloading the vehicle or for vehicle defects.
C) Convictions for road traffic breaches
D) Parking fines.

13 If there is no mention of traffic fines on the renewal form for your motor vehicle insurance policy, you don't have to disclose them to your insurer.
True or false?

ANSWERS

1. C. The number is an abbreviation of the model number for the microprocessor chip that the computer is designed around.
2. False. Making a purchase and getting redress if the purchase is unsatisfactory are two separate issues and should be dealt with separately. If you don't pay for the goods the seller has the right to sue you for the money. Proving the goods are faulty is a separate matter.
3. True. Provided the hammer hasn't fallen the auctioneer is obliged to accept your retraction.
4. False. You are only liable up to an amount of $50, provided your PIN or password wasn't used. You do, however, have an obligation to notify the card company as soon as you know the card is missing. If you don't give prompt notice, you may be held responsible for all the transactions.
5. B.
6. B. A Porro prism is the standard prism found in binoculars where the eyepiece lens is not in line with the larger objective lens.
7. B.
8. True. Some antibiotics break down with time, and some of the things they break down into are toxic — don't take antibiotics that are past their use-by date. Also throw out partially used packets; you should always take the full course of any that are prescribed for you, and shouldn't take leftovers instead of getting a new prescription.
9. C.
10. C. Cellulase is an enzyme which one detergent manufacturer claims breaks down gel that forms inside cotton fibres. (It also claims to produce the only laundry powder containing it — **BIO-ZET**.)
11. C.
12. A, B and C. If you have been convicted for road traffic breaches in the past and have not told your insurer about it, your policy may become void. Some insurance companies refuse to insure applicants with on-the-spot fines.
13. False. Once insured, you have to tell your insurance company on renewal of the contract (usually annually) about any fines or convictions.

RECALLS AND BANS

If you find a recall or ban not on our list please let us know.

Kawasaki Motors has recalled 1990-91-92 KAWASAKI ZX1100C (ZZ-R1100) MOTORCYCLES with vehicle identification number JKAZXBC1*LA000031 to JKAZXBC1*NAO29256 (located on compliance plate on frame adjacent to steering head) as the engine sprocket nut may loosen due to a faulty locking washer, causing the rear wheel to become locked. Contact an authorised Kawasaki dealer, who will replace parts free of charge.

Bi-Lo has recalled 235 g GLASS JARS of BI-LO MITE (product number 9310645013343) as the product may be contaminated with a foreign object. Return to a Bi-Lo supermarket for a refund.

Eveready Australia has issued a notice to owners of any EVEREADY DOLPHIN LANTERN made before July 1986 (date located on the lens plate as two digits) as the lantern may explode when turned on. Phone the hotline number 1800 656 525 for a new lens plate, free of charge.

Queensco-Unity Dairyfoods has recalled DAIRY LITE-LO (use-by date January 19, 21, 22 and 23) and AUSTRALIAN FARMERS FULL CREAM MILK (use-by date January 19, 21, 22, 23 and 26:1A) as they may have a salty flavour due to brine contamination. Affected packages include 300 mL, 600 mL, 1 L, 2 L, 4 L, 5 L and 20 L sizes. Return opened or unopened to the place of purchase, or call hotline on 008 674 765.

Fisons Pharmaceuticals has recalled all FISONAIR SPACER DEVICES (also known as holding chambers), used by asthmatics. They can be identified by "FISONS" stamped on the body. The rubber valve in the device may become dislodged during use. Contact Fisons on 1800 818 067. Leave your name, address and telephone number as well as the name and address of your doctor and the device will be replaced free of cost.

Ford Australia has recalled all 1993 FORD SC CAPRI VEHICLES built from May 21, 1992, to June 9, 1993, equipped with automatic transmission. The automatic transmission oil cooler hose may detach from the automatic transmission, which will result in loss of oil. Contact an authorised Ford dealer to have the vehicle rectified free of charge.

Hunter Toyline has recalled the SUNBRITE SUPER TOUGH SWIM RING (item 58240), the SUNBRITE SUPER TOUGH TYRE TUBE (item 58261) and the GOOD OL' TYRE TUBE (item 59260). The warning label which reads, "Warning — flotation toy — use only under competent supervision", which should be attached to each, is missing. Return to place of purchase for an exchange or refund.

CHOICE

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MAY 1993 — APRIL 1994

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(D) includes assessment of suitability for people with disabilities
(U) update of previous report
*** additions or corrections to reports, small follow-up items, or letter**

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